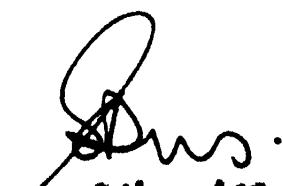


Miss White of Mayfair

1810


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Miss White of Mayfair

CHAPTER I

SHE stood before a long mirror, and, with deliberation, surveyed herself, inch by inch, as it were, from head to foot.

What she saw in the glass amply justified the approving nod she gave to it at last. A girl of nineteen, straight-limbed and as upright as a dart, with fine shoulders, a shapely neck, and a face framed prodigally in hair as black as night—which even the eyes of a misogynist might have dwelt upon with interest. For it was a face not so beautiful, perhaps, as striking. An alert intelligence dwelt in the large, dark,

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luminous eyes which further accentuated the almost excessive pallor of the skin. Decision was writ large in the firm lines of a red, full-lipped mouth and prominent chin —such as Rossetti was prone to limn. It was, in short, a face full of comely strength ; such a face as, once seen, would, of surety, long haunt the memory of the average man.

" Yes," said she, nodding to herself again, " I see what you are, Miss Eleanor White. You are not destitute of certain good points. You would make a fairly successful appeal to an uncritical eye. Your general appearance is soothing to one's vanity. You look, too, as though you might go out in the world and do things without fear or trembling and that, for the thousandth time, brings me to the question—who are you ? Frankly, you don't know, and guesswork is worse than useless. . You must gird up your loins and go to this young barrister. To

be sure, you have never met him but once, and he may think you bold ; but boldness usually leads to results. He is monstrously clever, and he is amiable, I am sure. He cannot refuse to listen to you, at all events, and, who knows, he may in the end consent to help you to solve this horrid mystery ; " and, turning away from the mirror with an impetuous gesture, she added, " I'll do it, and this very afternoon, too ! "

Half an hour later Miss Eleanor White might have been seen on the top of a Finchley 'bus, bent Strand-ward, on a truly heroic business.

Percy King, barrister, of Pump Court, Middle Temple, had achieved some notable successes of late, and great things were now predicted of him. A recent case at the Old Bailey in which, in the teeth of the most damning testimony, he had secured the

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acquittal of a man on the capital charge, had caused his fame to be trumpeted far and wide. This forensic victory was not the result of mere eloquence, which would have been of little avail in this instance, but of the formulation of a most ingenious theory, which proved triumphant all along the line. This was a great feather in the cap of a young man not yet turned thirty, and the immediate result was the purchase of a larger office table for the accommodation of the briefs that now fairly rained in upon him.

Upon this instant July afternoon, however, as he sat in his stuffy chambers in Pump Court, he was in a ruminative mood, and had no stomach for work. For once his mental equilibrium had been disturbed by a fair vision which he made not the slightest effort to efface from his memory. Rather did he dwell upon it, and with

avidity recall every incident of that delightful afternoon, when, at a recent garden party, he made the casual acquaintance of "a witch in book muslin," as it was his fancy to put it. He was wondering for the fiftieth time how he could compass another meeting when his office boy entered the room.

"A lady outside wishes to see you, sir."

"What name?"

"Miss White, sir."

"Oh!" said he, with a little gasp, "just so. Show her in at once, William."

He smoothed down his hair, and adjusted his neck-tie, and was just becoming conscious that his forehead was now freely beading with perspiration, when the door opened again, and, bounding to his feet, he advanced with an extended and trembling hand to greet his fair visitor.

"This is, indeed, an unexpected pleasure, Miss White," said he.

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"I dare say," she returned. "A sudden impulse——" and she paused.

"Oh, indeed;" and he placed a chair for her. "Pray be seated, Miss White, and are you then——"

"A creature of impulse? Well, at times, yes. You will think so, I am sure, when I tell you the object of my visit." Then, with a quick glance about the room, she added, "By the way, have you many lady callers here, Mr King?"

"Well—er—not as a rule. You see——"

For the first time then a look of troubled doubt came into her face, and she made a movement as if to rise.

"Oh! perhaps I shouldn't have come," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"Why should you be sorry?" he asked, with a smile of reassurance.

"I don't know. You see, it is just this. After we met at the garden party the other

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day, I heard so much about you and your wonderful cleverness in finding out things that I got your address, and thought—but oh! if I have made a mistake——”

“ Mistake ! ” said he, greatly puzzled. “ Why a mistake ? Your visit, I assure you, is a delightful variation from the usual routine here. Do you wish my advice upon——”

“ Yes, yes,” she said, eagerly, “ that is just it—your advice. I have been worried for years by a mystery, and I thought you might be able to solve it for me. I want to know who I am.”

He stared at her in blank amazement.

“ Who you are ? ” he repeated.

“ Precisely. It seems an odd request, I dare say. It is customary, I know, for one to be in a position to answer such an elementary question as that ; but frankly, I am not. I have not the remotest idea as —

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to who I am, where I was born, and who my father and mother were. It is a hateful mystery, and I want to have done with it. I must know. It is my duty to know, and I was wondering if you could help me. Can you—will you help me, Mr King?"

"Why, certainly," said he, more and more astonished. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure. But, I confess, yours is an amazing—I—er—mean, an unusual request, and I am—er—so absolutely in the dark at present as to the grounds upon which you base such a curious belief, that without your entire confidence—I—er—"

"Oh, you shall have that. Certainly, certainly. How else could I hope for your advice? I will tell you all I know about myself up to this very moment. I have no cause for keeping a single thing back. Shall I begin at once?"

"If you please, Miss White." And he

at once assumed the attitude of an attentive listener.

" Well, I will be as concise as possible, Since I can remember anything I have lived with a very excellent, indeed lovable, couple —a Mr and Mrs Maitland, who live in a quiet way in a charming old house in Finchley. He is secretary to some learned society, needless to specify, and she is a well-known contributor to various periodicals—and is a highly accomplished woman. They are both greatly respected in the neighbourhood. That they have both done their whole duty toward me—for a consideration received from some mysterious quarter—I freely concede; but 'all the king's horses and all the king's men' could never drag from them the secret I am now bent upon unravelling.

" In a moderate way I have never wanted for anything. Childless themselves,

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no father or mother could possibly have taken a keener interest in my welfare than they have done. Every reasonable wish or whim has always been gratified. For them I have nothing but unbounded gratitude, love, and respect. Let that be distinctly understood, Mr King."

He nodded his appreciation of that point, and she continued :—

" I was carefully educated ; first at home, then at a select boarding-school in a Western suburb. I spent a year at a *pension des demoiselles* in Paris, and another year at a similar institution in Germany—this was at Dresden—and it is now proposed, I believe, that I shall qualify myself for taking a degree at the London University. You will perceive by this, Mr King, that, for some reason or other, my education has been most sedulously looked after."

Again he nodded assent.

"Now," she continued, "there has been too much method in all this to attribute it to mere chance. There has been a guiding hand and a controlling will throughout, you must concede that."

"It is apparent on the very face of it," said he.

"Precisely; but where is this going to end, and what is the nature of the motive; for motive there must be on the part of this mysterious man or woman who, for some inscrutable reason, is thus attempting to shape my destiny?"

"That, of course, is a part of the puzzle which you wish me to solve," said he, with a smile.

"Exactly," and she smiled a very gracious smile in return. "And now I come to what I consider a very suspicious circumstance. I have a relative, or, at least, one who claims to be such."

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His eyebrows went up with surprise at this. "Why," said he, "should the possession of a relative be a suspicious circumstance? I have several myself, including a father, and——"

"Just so; but this is a distant cousin, or something of that kind, who affects to take an interest in me, but won't explain things."

"For what reason? Does he assign any?"

"It is not a he, but an old maid, and her name is Letitia Gibson, and she lives in a sweet little cottage at Barnet, with a she-ogre of a servant, but is a dear old thing herself, with funny little curls dangling about her ears, and she could tell me a lot, I verily believe, but she won't. At least, she says she cannot."

He laughed.

"She, then," said he, "is the suspicious circumstance?"

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"Exactly."

"Because she won't tell you a lot?"

"It practically comes to that."

"Do you see her often?"

"Once every three months."

"Since when?"

"Since I can remember."

"Does she ever call on you?"

"Sometimes—yes. At rare intervals,
however."

"The Maitlands know her, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"H'm!"

"Why h'm? I see you think she does
know a lot, then?"

"I can conceive it to be possible. Has
she any means?"

"Only a small annuity, I believe.
She makes me trivial presents at
times — gloves, and chocolates and
things."

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Mr King stroked his chin reflectively for a moment ; then—

“Would you mind giving me her address ? ” said he.

“Not at all,” she replied. “I will do so with great pleasure if you will kindly give me a slip of paper.”

He did so. She wrote upon it the name and address, and handed it to him.

“Thanks. Do you object to my making discreet inquiries in that quarter ? ”

“Not in the least. It is better, however, that they *should* be discreet.”

“That,” said he, “is why I used the word ; and I need not assure you, Miss White, that if in my small way I can be of service to you, it will afford me extreme pleasure. I may also add——”

At this point interruption came in the guise of the office boy.

"Mr Johnson is here, and wants to see you very particular, sir."

She at once arose.

"Oh, then I won't detain you a moment longer; but you were going to say something further. I am rather curious to know what. Do you mind?"

He smiled, and turning to the boy said: "Tell Mr Johnson I will see him in a minute or two," and when they were alone again, he added, "what was I going to say, Miss White? Oh, only that I was jolly pleased to make your acquaintance at the garden-party the other day, and—oh, yes—of course—to remind you that you have quite forgotten to give me your address."

"Dear me!" said she, as a rosy flush suddenly sped to her cheeks; "why, so I have. How careless of me, to be sure! I haven't a card, but 'The Hollies,' Church End, Finchley, will always find.

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me." With that she extended her hand quite frankly. " You must not keep your friend Mr Johnson waiting. Good-bye ! Mr King."

With that she was up and away, leaving him to a very mixed set of reflections.

CHAPTER II

A GREAT surprise lay in wait for Miss White when she returned to "The Hollies" an hour or so later. As she loitered a moment or two among the flower-beds of a delightful old-fashioned garden a servant came out to her.

"If you please, Miss Eleanor," said she, "you are wanted in the drawing-room. Mrs Maitland is getting terrible anxious and fidgety about your staying away so long, for a gentleman has been waiting to see you for nearly an hour."

Miss White was plainly astonished.

"To see me, Mary? Are you sure?"

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"Oh yes, miss. I was told to come out and tell you."

"What sort of a gentleman is he?"

"Oh! nothing much to speak of. An oldish gent with a bald head and gold spectacles, and very affable. Might be a parson, or a doctor, or something of that sort. Nothing to be frightened of, miss. You mustn't think that."

"Frightened, Mary! What an idea! I was a little surprised at first, that was all."

"Of course you were, I dare say. It wouldn't be you to be frightened at anybody, so to speak."

"I trust not," said Miss White, as without further ado she entered the house and walked straight into the drawing-room.

A benevolent-looking and spectacled old gentleman, dressed all in broadcloth, rose

at once from his chair; but, curiously enough, what at once arrested her attention was a look of mingled embarrassment and alarm upon the face of Mrs Maitland, who seemed a sweet and gentle little creature, with pink cheeks and soft dove's eyes, and what normally would have been a veritable rosebud of a mouth. But there was now a perceptible quiver on the lips as she spoke.

"I am so glad you have come, my dear," said she, "for this gentleman—Mr Benwell—has been waiting for nearly an hour to see you. The nature of his communication will come to you, as it has to me, as a great surprise, and I hope you will be able to take it more philosophically than, for the moment, I am able to do. I will leave you together for a while."

Miss White laid at once a detaining hand upon her arm.

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"Don't go," said she. "Why should you go?"

"Why, indeed?" interposed Mr Benwell, with a reassuring smile. "Mrs Maitland and I have been friends for many years, and she knows that I would not for the world unnecessarily afflict her. Indeed, her distress at the prospect of losing you is not at all justified. Many opportunities of meeting again will occur."

"That is not my grievance," said Mrs Maitland, as she reseated herself. "It is having this thing suddenly sprung upon me—upon us—without a moment's warning."

"What thing?" said Miss White, every nerve in her body now tingling with excited curiosity. "How and in what way are you to lose me? I do not understand. What has happened? And who, pray, is this gentleman? Is he in any way connected

with the mystery of my existence ? Can he tell me who I am, who brought me here, and why I am here ? Surely it is high time that I knew these things, whatever else of an extraordinary nature may now be in store for me ? ”

Mr Benwell’s smile was benignity itself, as, after exchanging a glance with Mrs Maitland, he replied—

“ I am a solicitor, to begin with, Miss White ; and, for a good many years I have acted as a sort of trustee or guardian for you. You were a very small creature indeed when this responsibility was imposed upon me.”

“ Imposed upon you ? ” The query came quick and sharp.

“ Well, no. I should not have used such a term,” said he. “ I mean it is many years since I assumed, in a professional capacity, that responsibility, which I have fulfilled

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to the very best of my ability. Certain sums were placed at my disposal, and my instructions were, first of all, to provide for you a suitable home."

"Then it was you who brought me here?"

"I was instrumental in doing so. Yes. I am an old friend of Mr Maitland's."

"A very dear friend, indeed," interposed Mrs Maitland, with sudden warmth, "and I dare say it was a very mercenary proceeding on our part; but we were childless, and, at that time, in dire straits, and the proposition made to us seemed a God-send, and a God-send you have truly been to us, my dear Eleanor. We loved you from the very first. We have always loved you very dearly; and it will be a wrench indeed to lose you after all these long years."

The girl seemed quite insensible to this outburst of genuine emotion, for she turned

coldly to the solicitor again, and said, "There has been a certain method in the form and manner of my education. Was this in accordance with the instructions to which you have just referred ? "

"Quite so," he answered.

"And to what end was I thus carefully educated ? "

"That you might earn your own living."

"When the funds placed at your disposal were exhausted ? "

"Precisely."

"And they are now exhausted ? "

"Unfortunately, yes."

"I begin to see things a little more clearly now. Who supplied you with these funds ? "

"A client whose name I cannot reveal."

"A professional secret ? "

"A professional secret. Yes."

She reflected a moment, with her hand

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to her lips ; then looked up again to the solicitor.

“ Is my name really White ? ” she asked.

“ I was so assured.”

“ Do you know for a certainty ? ”

“ I do not.”

“ Have I a parent living ? ”

“ I don’t think so. That is really my firm belief, Miss White.”

“ You will admit, I am sure, that there is a good deal of mystery in all this ? ”

“ I admit it frankly.”

“ Are you a friend or an enemy of mine, Mr Benwell ? Bluntly—yes or no ? ”

“ A friend ; most emphatically a friend,” said he, in a tone that at once carried conviction with it.

“ Then tell me who Miss Gibson is, and why she takes such an apparent interest in me. Is she really a relative of mine, or is she not ? ”

Mr Benwell seemed somewhat taken aback, it may be, by the suddenness of the question, for he hesitated a moment before answering.

"Well," he said at last, "I cannot positively answer the question, and I ought to content myself with that reply; but I really do take a very great interest in your welfare, my dear girl, and I will go so far as to say this, whether she be a relative or not, I am well aware of her feelings towards you, and I honestly believe that she knows vastly more about you than I do. That, I may add, is a hint for private consumption only."

"Oh, quite so," she said, in a less frigid tone. "The hint is a very valuable one to me, and I thank you exceedingly; and now we come to the object of your present visit, Mr Benwell. I am to leave 'The Hollies,' it would appear, through the

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exhaustion of supplies. What am I to do next?"

Mr Benwell had instant recourse to his pocket-book, whence he produced a letter which he passed over to her. She glanced at the superscription, and read:—

" Miss Doris Bruce,
99, Curzon Street,
Mayfair.

Introducing Miss White."

" That," continued the solicitor, " is addressed to a client of mine, who is seeking the services of a lady companion and secretary. I took the liberty of mentioning your name and qualifications, and have made an appointment for you at 1.30 p.m. to-morrow. It will be an excellent opening, and, for a number of reasons, I would strongly urge its acceptance upon you."

There was a certain something in his

manner that caused her to look straight into his eyes for a moment. Then said she—.

“ I will accept your advice, for I believe it to be the counsel of a well-wisher.”

“ It truly is,” he replied.

“ Have you any objection to my calling upon Miss Gibson this afternoon, and acquainting her with the strange turn in my affairs ? ”

“ None whatever,” said he, seemingly a little surprised at the question. “ Why should I have ? Go to her by all means ; only you must not let her persuade you to change your mind.”

“ I have promised,” said she, simply. “ I never break a promise.”

“ Very well, then,” said he, rising with a very palpable sense of relief from his chair ; “ that then is clearly understood. You will hear further from me shortly.”

For instance, there is a small sum still standing to your credit, and a few other details of settlement—mere details.” And with that he shook hands with the two ladies, and bowed himself out of the room.

Then, in a certain revulsion of feeling, Miss White, the impulsive creature, suddenly threw her arms about Mrs Maitland, and sobbing on her shoulder, said that no one else on earth was so dear to her or ever could be so dear to her ; but, heart-breaking as the situation was, she supposed it must be resolutely faced. To all of which Mrs Maitland made sympathetic rejoinders. Then Miss White flicked aside the tear-drops, and a quarter of an hour later was speeding on her way by train to Barnet.

Hers was now a grim determination to “have it out,” with Miss Gibson. She had been greatly impressed by the solicitor’s

words—coinciding, as they did, with a settled conviction of her own. Yes; of a surety Miss Gibson knew everything, and have it out of her she must, and would. Fully absorbed in these reflections, she had passed down the High Street, and was nearing Hadley Church, hard by which Miss Gibson's modest cottage stood, when a gentleman stopped directly in front of her and lifted his hat. She looked up and found herself face to face with Mr Percy King.

"Well! Of all the surprises!" she began, when he cut in with—

"Quite mutual, I assure you. You see, having quickly got rid of Johnson, and my head being so full of what you had told me, I jumped into a hansom, drove to King's Cross, took train for Barnet, and here I am. I have just left Miss Gibson's cottage."

"Whither my own steps are now bent?"

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said she. "But you promised to be very discreet. You have broken your word."

"Not at all. I had thought it all out, and would have been discretion itself, only unfortunately——"

"She was not at home?"

"Precisely."

"Whom did you see?"

"A holy terror of an old woman. You, I believe, called her a female ogre!"

"Quite right; that was Rebecca. And she said——?"

"That Miss Gibson had gone up to London, and would not return until evening."

"H'm! What a nuisance! I wanted to see her very particularly. I must go back now."

"So must I," said he. "Better go together, hadn't we?"

"By all means. Something very strange

has happened this afternoon, and I want to tell you all about it."

They walked very slowly together to the station, and he accompanied her in the train as far as Church End. Just before parting he said—

"Yes. They are very wealthy people, though her brother has the reputation of having a very big bee in his bonnet. Half the house is a museum of Egyptian antiquities, I believe. But mummies and things won't trouble you much, I dare say. Tell you what, if you don't mind I'll meet you at King's Cross at one o'clock tomorrow, and drive you down to Curzon Street." And after a moment's hesitation on her part it was so arranged.

Punctually at one on the morrow he met her on the platform at King's Cross, and a few minutes later they were faring merrily*

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in a hansom towards the West End. As they turned at last into Curzon Street a splendid carriage and pair went dashing by. Reclining upon the silken cushions was a beautiful and elegantly-dressed lady. At sight of her Miss White gave a convulsive gasp, and clutched his arm.

“Good heavens!” said she, “did you see the lady who has just passed?”

“Yes—of course. Why? What is the matter? Are you ill?”

“No, no; I am not ill; but that lady is Miss Gibson, that is all!”

“Great Scott!” said he, “and look! she has just stopped in front of No. 99.”

CHAPTER III

PERCY KING at once stopped the cab.
“ There you are,” said he ; “ she is getting out of the carriage. See, she is mounting the steps of No. 99, and the carriage is driving away.”

“ But,” said she, in a tremor of excitement, “ it is such an extraordinary thing. Are you sure the house is No. 99 ? ”

“ Count up for yourself. There is No. 113,” said he. “ It is absolutely certain that she has gone into No. 99. Are you equally sure that she really is Miss Gibson ? ”

“ Of course I am. How can I possibly

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be mistaken in a face I have seen hundreds of times?"

"That seems true enough. Still—"

"Still, what?"

"One is deceived occasionally. There are certain extraordinary resemblances which—"

"Quite so. However, it's useless to argue about it. I shall quickly know whether I am right or not."

"Perhaps so, perhaps not," said he, "your appointment, please remember, is with Miss Doris Bruce, and not with Miss Gibson."

"Of course I have not forgotten that," she replied, in a slight tone of irritation. "Only—well, we shall see what we shall see. There! A clock somewhere is striking the half-hour. I will get out here, and walk tip to No. 99." And she pushed open one of the flap doors of the cab.

"Tell you what," said he, "suppose I drive about for half an hour, and meet you here at the corner again. I am dying with curiosity to know the result. Do you mind?"

She laughed.

"This is all very unconventional, is it not?" she asked.

"Very. But then, you see, I am now, in a sense, your legal adviser, and—"

"Possess privileges? Well, perhaps—" and before he could make a movement to assist her she had leaped from the cab. She paused one instant on the kerb, then looked up again. "Very well, then, in half an hour," and as she now turned a set and determined face in the direction of No. 99, she heard the cab roll away in the opposite direction.

She mounted the steps of No. 99, and rang vigorously. A footman quickly

answered the summons. She at once discovered that her coming was expected, for, without a word, she was shown into a reception room leading from the entrance hall.

Her suspense was of but a moment's duration. The door suddenly opened, and she looked up in bewildered surprise at the smiling and comely presence now confronting her. She, indeed, recognised at once the lady she had just seen in the carriage. But how was it now possible for her to identify in this elegant woman the prim and precise old spinster of Barnet, with her gold pince-nez, her corkscrew curls of iron grey, and her little vanities, in the guise of pink ribbons and imitation lace ? The idea seemed absurd. Still, at the first glance, there was an unmistakable, even extraordinary, facial resemblance between the two, which would have been apparent

to the most casual observer. The manifest difference in their ages, however, was a something impossible to argue away, and Miss White, though wondering greatly, was compelled to admit that her first impressions had been at fault.

She was the first to speak. Quickly mastering her initial nervousness, she said—

“I have brought a letter of introduction from Mr Benwell to Miss Doris Bruce.”

“I am Miss Bruce,” said the other, with a genial smile, “and I take it that you are Miss White, of whom he speaks in terms of very high praise. Pray be seated, Miss White.”

By way of reply, the latter calmly handed over Mr Benwell’s letter, and seated herself, with all the aplomb in the world, in the nearest chair.

Miss Bruce glanced over the brief missive,

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and her manner was very gracious and kindly as she said—

“ I want a companion, a real companion, who is young, intelligent, and sympathetic. Your face proclaims the possession of the first qualification, Miss White, and I am assured by Mr Benwell, whose opinion I very highly value, that you are equally endowed with the others.”

“ Oh, well,” returned Miss White, now perfectly at her ease, “ I can’t imagine how Mr Benwell comes to know so much about me, since I never set eyes on him until yesterday. Still, I am fairly intelligent, I suppose, and so far as education goes, I am suitably equipped, I dare say, for the position. But I really don’t know whether I am sympathetic or not. I want to be—I try to be—and I think I would be, under favourable circumstances. But those circumstances have always been denied me.

Did Mr Benwell explain to you that I was nobody in particular ? ”

Miss Bruce seemed somewhat disconcerted by the abruptness of the question.

“ Well,” said she, “ he certainly hinted at something, which I felt to be quite immaterial.”

“ That I never knew my father and mother, perhaps ? ”

“ It was to that effect. It did not concern me. It does not now concern me. My business at present is with Miss White —solely with Miss White, and her qualifications for the position I am pleased to offer her.”

This was most graciously said ; but, with a strange persistence characteristic of the girl, Miss White went on—

“ It is awfully good and kind of you to say this. But, still, I think you ought to know everything. Did he tell you, for

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instance, that I have one relative, a dear old thing, who lives at Barnet, and who knows all about me, I am sure? I don't think it can be anything very bad, else she never could have been so good and kind to me as she has always been. Never, never, could I get so much as a hint from her, though I have tried over and over again. Still, if you were to write—I will give you her address—the result might prove more satisfactory to both of us, especially as I should not care to take a step of this kind without her knowledge and consent."

This was very artful on the part of Miss White. Like a cat watching a mouse, she had noted every change in the features of Miss Bruce as she uttered these words. She saw ~~a~~ something, but it was a very intangible something. If any trace of emotion had appeared in her face at all,

it was but a pleasurable and transitory one.

"If that is your wish, Miss White," she replied; "I will with pleasure write to this lady, simply stating that I desire to take you into my service, and asking if it meets with her approval. I shall certainly say nothing more. What inquiries I wished to make have been made. I am perfectly satisfied, and it now simply remains for you to say whether you personally are willing or not to accept the position I am prepared to offer you."

Miss White at once threw up the sponge. With the brightest of smiles, she said—

"What else can I do but accept? I cast all sorts of doubts upon my respectability—if I may use such a strong term—though I don't quite mean that either, but you will not hear of it. I should be glad if you would write to Miss Gibson, Rose

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Cottage, Hadley Common, Barnet, setting forth the circumstances; but, in any case, if it be your wish, I gratefully accept the offer. When shall you require my services?"

To an acute observer, Miss Bruce's smile would have seemed very much like a smile of triumphant satisfaction as she replied— "At once, to-morrow, if it will suit your convenience. And now as to terms——"

"Oh, pray, don't speak of them," said Miss White, with genuine earnestness. "It is all so strange and unexpected. I know nothing as yet of these things. I must leave it entirely to you."

"Very well, let it stand at that. And now, with regard to your duties. Frankly, I am very lonely in this great house. I want a bright and cheerful companion, such as I am sure you will prove to be. I live here with my brother, who is a very

eccentric man. He never goes into society. He never entertains. He is the slave to a hobby. To me it is a gruesome hobby. There are strange apartments in this house. They belong solely to him. In them he spends most of his time. They need not concern you. They do not concern me. You will meet him at dinner, but his will be a life apart from ours. You will drive with me in the Park ; you will accompany me to the opera, to the theatre. We shall pay occasional visits to Paris and elsewhere. I will make your life as pleasant as possible. I have already taken a fancy to you. We shall be great friends, I am sure, when you know me better. You see that I am perfectly frank and open with you ; you must be the same with me. Indeed, if I am any judge of character, you will be the same. Don't trouble yourself any longer about your origin. What does it matter ? If

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"there is any mystery about it, let it remain a mystery. Who cares? I certainly do not, and surely there is nobody else——"

There was an abrupt pause in this strange outburst of confidence, and a look of suspicion suddenly appeared in her eyes, as she added, "I saw you in a hansom cab as I passed by in my carriage."

Miss White's eyes opened wide with surprise at this.

"Well," said she, "and what of that?"

"You were not alone."

For some unaccountable reason, and greatly to her annoyance, Miss White felt hot blood suddenly tingling up to her very ears.

"No," said she. "I was with a gentleman."

"A friend, of course?"

"Not exactly. It was Mr Percy King, the clever barrister, whom you may

possibly know by reputation. I had been to him for advice."

"About what?"

Miss White at once saw her opportunity.

"About what you have just suggested I should dismiss from my mind—about the mystery of my birth and parentage. I asked him to solve that mystery for me."

"And he said?"

"That he would do all that lay in his power to accomplish that end."

"I see. And he knew the object of your visit here?"

"Oh yes; I told him all about it. Again, why not?"

Miss Bruce's manner changed in a instant.

"Pardon me," she said. "I did not intend to be rude. But you have now absolutely convinced me on one point."

"Which is——?"

"That you are as frank and as open as the

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day, and that henceforth I shall have respect, faith, and confidence in you. Still, I advise you once again to let that matter drop."

Greatly wondering, Miss White made a half promise to that effect, and shortly afterwards the momentous interview came to an end, it being agreed that she would take up her residence in her new capacity at No. 99, Curzon Street, on the morrow.

Percy King sat in the cab at the spot agreed upon, impatiently awaiting her return.

"Well?" said he, when she turned up at last.

"It was an absurd mistake," she replied. "It was not Miss Gibson after all, but Miss Doris Bruce. I have accepted her offer, and 99, Curzon Street, will be my address after to-morrow. I must get back to

Finchley at once. Do you mind driving me to King's Cross?"

"•Do I mind?" •he said, with a laugh, and the next moment they were up and away together.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN Percy King, at nine o'clock on the following morning, entered his chambers in Pump Court, he found, among his letters, one bearing the Barnet post-mark.

“Hello!” said he. “What can this mean?” He thrust his finger through the flap of the envelope, and pulled forth a note. It was written in a curious, crabbed hand, with long up and down strokes, and it read thus:—

“Rose Cottage, Hadley Common.
“Sir,—I found your card upon my return from London this evening. I am at a loss to know what on earth brought you here,

but shall be pleased to ascertain if you can make it convenient to call again to-morrow at one.—Yours truly,

“LAVINIA GIBSON.”

“By Jove!” said he, “the old party hits straight from the shoulder, and methinks I have put my foot into it. I promised the White girl to be discreet. This is discretion with a vengeance. Knowing what I know now, what the deuce can I say when I get there? I can’t confine myself to the weather, and the crops. *Ça serait une bêtise.* Shall I back out of it, send her a wire saying that I have just contracted some deadly disease, and——. No, I can’t reconcile that with my ordinary methods. Funk, too, is a detestable word, and ought to be expunged from the dictionaries. Besides, why should I jib at a pleasant interview with a dear little old lady in

corkscrew ringlets, who, through mistaken information, I was led to believe, wished to let her cottage furnished for the season. Surely I can muster up courage enough for that. What is the time ? ” and he looked at his watch. “ Nine o’clock. Three hours yet for a scramble through my work, and then up to Hadley on the tick of the clock.” He was about to refer to his papers when he suddenly threw himself back in his chair again. “ By Jove ! ” said he, “ how, I wonder, has this White girl got such a deuce of a sudden pull on one ? Can’t shake it off ; and the strangest part of it is, I don’t want to shake it off. Still, what do you see in her, old man ? What is the attraction ? Well, to begin with, there is no dashed nonsense about that girl ; no pink and white bread and butter miss she, with whom you have to mind your P’s and Q’s every instant for fear she may faint

at a mere man's random remarks. That's what I like about her. Of course she is obsessed with this silly idea of digging a parent or two out of, I dare say, respectable obscurity. Why can't she let sleeping parents lie? But, upon my word, I believe that if I told her I had a red-hot clue that necessitated her going over to Paris, or any other spot on the map of Europe with me, she'd pack up like a shot, meet me at Charing Cross station, and think she was doing just an ordinary honest and meritorious sort of thing in accompanying me. No good, my boy; she is a dear, ripping sort of girl, and you have got it bad. That is the long and short of it. And now for three hours' hard work."

Straightway he fell, tooth and nail, upon a brief of many folios, and he never looked up again until the stroke of noon. Then he snatched up his hat, and made a bolt

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for Fleet Street. A swift hansom soon whirled him to King's Cross,' and with reasonable punctuality he found himself once more in front of Rose Cottage, hard by Hadley Church.

A quaint, low-browed old cottage it was, set well back from the road, with its red pantiles half smothered in purple clematis and Virginia creepers. The long fore-garden was riotous with hollyhock, and sunflower, and phlox and dahlias, and half a hundred other honest blooms, with a great impertinent monkey-tree sprawling midway. He walked down a weedy path leading to the doorway, lifted and let fall an old-fashioned knocker, and awaited results.

The "Ogre" put in an instant appearance, but upon this occasion she did not seem much of an ogre after all; only a little woman, with ferrety eyes, in which

suspicion usually dwelt, as though she had long acted as Cerberus in a house subject to frequent incursions of bailiffs or importunate tradesmen. She now showed a solitary tooth in her upper jaw, which he was fain to accept as a smile of welcome, and, without a word, he was conducted into a little low-ceiled and oak-panelled room, now in semi-obscurity owing to the lozenged window being half overhung with creepers. Mr King, however, could not help observing the taste with which the little room was furnished ; the Chippendale furniture, the rare old mezzotints and etchings upon the walls, the valuable china in a Sheraton cabinet, and many other tokens of refinement forcing themselves upon his critical attention.

“ By Jove ! the old girl knows a thing or two in the way of decoration,” he said to himself as he was examining a rare bit of

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Capo di Monte, when he heard a cough behind him.

He suddenly turned, and found himself facing an extremely pretty old lady, with her face half-encircled with curls of the early Victorian period, and looking rather stiff and starchy in an old brocade gown, evidently donned for the occasion.

"Mr King, I presume?" said she.

"Yes—er—exactly," said he, for an instant quite thrown off his balance. "That is my name—and—er—"

"Then you received my letter, of course?"

"Oh yes; of course. It came by the morning post."

"Then pray be seated, Mr King, and be good enough to explain the object of your visit. I was not at home yesterday when you called, and I felt quite nervous when I saw your card upon my return, for I have a sort of horror of legal gentlemen. Not in a

personal sense, sir," she added, with the sweetest of smiles. "Oh, dear, no ; but I have had a good deal of experience—involving not a little expense—with the law in my younger days, and the mere thought of a lawyer wishing to see me now gives me the creeps, so to speak. I hope your business with me is not anything very dreadful, Mr King."

"Oh, dear, no," said he ; now wishing that he had stuck to his brief instead of coming north to ruffle the feathers of a dear old soul like this. "I am afraid that you are labouring under some misapprehension. Miss—er—Gibson, you see, I am on' the look-out for a little furnished cottage in the suburbs, and I received an intimation that——"

"That this cottage was to let?"

"Well—I—er—was led to believe——"

"By whom?" and the old lady drew

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herself up with quiet dignity, and fixed him with a steady glance that made him wonder once more why he had left Pump Court to make an ass of himself in these northern latitudes.

"Well," said he, bent upon a bold stroke, since it was neck or nothing with him now, "I chanced to meet a young lady at a garden party lately—a Miss White—who, I believe, is a relative of yours."

She appeared encased in buckram now, and her inquiring glance suddenly hardened.

"I know a Miss White, who lives at Church End," said she, "and I take a certain amount of interest in her. In fact, she is, in a remote degree, related to me; but, sir, do you really mean to tell me that she—this Miss White—suggested to you that I wished to let this cottage?"

"Decidedly," said he to himself, "I have put my hoof into it this time." Then,

aloud : " Well—er—I got a sort of impression from her that—" and he came to a sudden pause, for she had lifted a dainty little forefinger, and pointed it straight at him.

" Mr King," said she, " your methods are very crude, and if it were not a very rude thing to say I should express my doubts as to whether, in spite of what is printed on your card, you really do belong to the legal profession."

He caught fire at this, and was about to make a hasty rejoinder, when she interposed with a still more forcible gesture.

" I mean no offence," said she, " but you must either be frank with me, or the interview must come at once to an end. Plainly, now, what is the object of this visit ? You certainly do not take me for a fool."

Beaten down at all points, he at once took the bull by the horns.

" You are quite too much for me, Miss Gibson," he replied. " If I had had a few hours' previous acquaintance with you I doubt if I should have adopted such crude methods, as you so justly put it. They were not only crude, but idiotic. I candidly admit it. But now for the honest truth, and I know you will pull me up in an instant if I deviate a hair's breadth from it, and why on earth you are afraid of lawyers I can't for the life of me imagine. The bald truth is, this. I met, as I said, Miss White at a garden party recently, and—well, I admired her greatly. To my intense surprise, a few days later, she came to my chambers and made a certain statement."

" Which was ? "

" That, as matters practically stood, she was nobody's child—which, as Euclid says,

is absurd—that she was determined to find out whose child she really was, and earnestly begged me to help her in that quest. Now, admiring Miss White, as I have just admitted to you, I at once consented to aid her if she would put me in possession of some tangible clue upon which I could work. She mentioned you at once, stating her honest belief that you alone could solve the mystery. There, you have it in a nutshell, Miss Gibson ; and I really think, for the sake of the poor girl's peace of mind—”

“ That will do, Mr King. I wish to hear nothing further. Your intentions are good enough, I dare say, and, though I freely forgive you, I wish you had not resorted to subterfuges unworthy of your high reputation and abilities.”

“ Then you will give me no information—no inkling, as to—”

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"No! For her peace of mind—as you put it—it were better not. Let us understand each other at once. In spite of your foolish attempt to deceive me I can plainly see that you are a manly man, and an honest one. You admire Miss White. I do not blame you ; there is much to admire in the girl, and though I can quite sympathise with her natural desire to know what, under ordinary circumstances, she ought to know, there are reasons in this case—and I trust you will consider this as a privileged communication—there are very serious reasons why you should, in her interest, cease at once to pursue these investigations further. I am speaking in all earnestness, Mr King, as I dearly love the girl, and it is solely on her behalf that I enjoin this reticence upon you."

Mr King felt himself impaled upon the horns of a serious dilemma. He could not

for a moment doubt the genuineness of this appeal, but what would the White girl say to it, and how resist her counter appeal, further stimulated, as it would be, by this additional element of mystery ?

He compounded matters in the end by thanking Miss Gibson for her frankness, and promising to bring such influence as he possessed to bear upon Miss White, though whether she would be amenable to his advice or not he was quite unable to say.

At last, with an uneasy sense of having been discomfited all along the line by a little old maid in ringlets, he turned his back on Rose Cottage, and eventually found his way to that good old hostelry, "The Salisbury Arms," where he lunched heartily and well.

It was just on the stroke of three. He had lighted a cigar, and was standing at

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the coach entrance to the inn, when a splendidly-appointed carriage and pair drove rapidly by. Both the equipage and its occupant, an elegantly-attired lady, he recognized in an instant. "Boots," of the inn, was standing beside him.

"Know that party?" asked King, in a casual way.

"Well, I do, and I don't," came the reply. "She's some swell from London wot comes up here sometimes to see an old party living down on Hadley Common."

"Oh! And what do you know about her?"

"Boots," finding a half-crown unexpectedly slipped into his hand, suddenly became communicative. He lowered his voice, and Mr King bent his head to listen.

"Ah! It's like that, is it?" he said to himself a few minutes later, as he retraced his footsteps in the direction of Rose

Cottage. "Very cleverly played, indeed, Miss Gibson; though I was a fool not to have seen through the little trick at once. There is a deal more in this than I suspected. The White girl is right, after all. There is a desperate effort being made to cover up some sinister mystery, and it is a lucky thing I have got upon the track of it so soon."

By this time he stood once more before the cottage gate. He lifted the latch and entered the garden.

"And now," said he, "to expose the whole bag of tricks."

CHAPTER V

HIS was a noisy and peremptory knock. The door was almost immediately opened, and the “Ogre” with arms akimbo, confronted him.

“ Well, upon my word,” said she. “ *You again?* ”

“ Yes ; but please don’t snap at me like that ; it makes me nervous. I have returned to have a few minutes’ further conversation with Miss Gibson.”

“ That you cannot, then,” was the tart rejoinder.

“ May I be permitted to ask why ? ”

“ Because she has gone out, that’s

why, and good enough reason it is, too."

He laughed mockingly.

"Oh! a most excellent reason, indeed."

"Then what are you laughing at? Do you believe me, or don't you? Not that I care very much either way. For two pins, I would slam the door in your face for your impudence."

"Well," said he, still laughing, "I haven't any pins about me, and I am not quite ready yet to have the door slammed in my face, either. Of course, I believe you, for I saw her myself about half an hour ago in a splendid carriage, driving in the direction of London. She looked twenty years younger, to be sure, but, then, people can make up in these days so as to appear to be of any age. Naturally, therefore, I did not expect to find her in."

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"Then what on earth brought you back again?" was the shrill rejoinder.

"Well, just to make doubly sure that my suspicions were correct, that is all. I am more than satisfied. I have wasted no time. Ha ! ha ! not a bit of it."

"You must be daft, young man," came the contemptuous retort, as the old woman looked him up and down in undisguised amazement. "What do you mean by your suspicions, and this cock-and-bull story of a splendid carriage, with Miss Gibson sitting in it, looking twenty years younger, and driving away to London? There has been no grand carriage here, and not ten minutes ago I saw her walk out of this very door with a letter in her hand, to post herself, I dare say. The wonder is you didn't meet her on the way. I needn't then have wasted my time standing here, talking nonsense with as silly a young

fool as I have met this many a long day."

Her words irritated him, and he turned hotly upon her.

"Come, come," said he, "no high horses for me. You are well paid, I dare say, to keep up this deception, and you do it very well, I admit that. But, then, I chance to know that no Miss Gibson lives here, or ever has lived here."

"Pray, then, who does live here?" The voice came from behind. He turned sharply, and found himself face to face with Miss Gibson herself.

For a moment he was too flabbergasted to speak, and the "Ogre" took up the parable.

"Oh, m'm! the silliest things this young man has been saying to me, about your not living here at all, which you heard yourself, m'm, and how he saw you, looking twenty

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years younger, driving in a splendid carriage to London, and the Lord knows what other rubbish. I was getting sickened with it all, and glad enough I am you've come back just in the thick of it, so I can get to my work again."

"Yes," said Miss Gibson, "you had better go back to your work, Rebecca. And as for you, Mr King," she added, with quiet dignity, "perhaps you will be good enough to step inside and explain the meaning of this extraordinary behaviour?"

Greatly confused, he followed her without a word into the little drawing-room. She closed the door, and motioned to him to be seated. Then she turned a very stern face in his direction, and said, simply—

"Now, sir."

"Well," he began, in a somewhat shame-faced manner, "it seems plain enough that

I have been deceived—that I have purchased half-a-crown's worth of false information."

"About me?"

"About you, yes. You invite frankness—"

"I insist upon frankness, Mr King," said she.

"Very good," he returned. "I am more and more convinced that you were amply justified in saying that my methods were crude. Hitherto they have been deplorably so. But I have now done with all disguises, and I propose to be as frank and open as the day with you. May I expect the same from you in return?"

"You irritate me, Mr King," she said, with a sudden asperity. "You have no cause to doubt my good faith, and you seem to have already forgotten that

you have been guilty of a breach of good manners, for which I still await explanation."

"Quite so. I beg your pardon," said he. "I will come straight to the point. After leaving you this afternoon I lunched at 'The Salisbury Arms'. As I was coming away a carriage and pair drove by. The sole occupant of the carriage was a Miss Bruce of Curzon Street, Mayfair, who greatly resembles you. I made inquiries, and ascertained that Miss Bruce was a frequent visitor here. Further inquiries elicited the statement that Miss Bruce, of Curzon Street, and Miss Gibson, of Rose Cottage, were one and the same person."

"And for this precious piece of information you paid the lordly sum of half-a-crown," said she, her hard-set features suddenly giving way to an amused smile.

"I was certainly guilty of that extravagance," he replied, smiling grimly in return.

"And then," she pursued, "having seen this remarkable woman drive away in the direction of London, you hustled back at once to my little cottage here fired with honest indignation, and bent upon exposing the imposture so grossly put upon you. What a clever man you are, Mr King! The Press has done you but scant justice after all, I fear. May I be so bold as to ask whether, in your honest opinion, I am the same woman whom, in the interest of Miss White, you interviewed an hour or so ago?"

"Why, certainly."

"You are convinced that you are now talking to me, and not to Miss Bruce, of Curzon Street?"

"Oh! quite so," said he, with a dis-

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quieting sense that she was once again the mistress of the situation.

"Then," she continued, "let us come at once to a clear and final understanding in this matter. My patience with you is well-nigh exhausted. I am not in the habit of being badgered by strangers in my own house. It would meet the merits of the case if I were to show you to the door at once ; but this much for your further information I will add. Within a moment or two of your departure the postman brought me a letter. It came from a certain Doris Bruce, of 99, Curzon Street, the lady doubtless to whom you have just referred. Should your surmises be correct, it is not for me, at least, to enter into the reasons which brought her to Barnet to-day. I have but to do with the letter" —which she now produced from her pocket and extended to Mr King. "Open and

read it," she added, as he merely glanced at the superscription on the envelope.

He did so, and this is what he read:—

"DEAR MADAM,—Upon the strength of certain recommendations I yesterday engaged as companion Miss White of 'The Hollies,' Church End, Finchley. It is her wish that I should write and acquaint you with this fact, and ask if you—as her only relative, as she informs me—have any objection to her assuming such a position in my service. You will quite understand that I am not writing to obtain further credentials on her behalf—they are quite satisfactory, as they stand—but simply in compliance with her wish to do nothing without your knowledge and consent. The favour of an early reply will greatly oblige.—Yours truly,

"DORIS BRUCE."

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"Just so," said he, as he returned the letter to her. "I knew of this yesterday."

"Indeed!" said she. "And carefully abstained from mentioning the fact to me to-day."

"For no reason in particular, I most earnestly assure you," he replied. "It simply did not occur to me, that is all."

"Very well," said she, "let it stand at that. Now, may I ask if you are at all familiar with the handwriting of this letter?"

He at once saw the drift of the query, and, with a sudden remembrance of Miss Gibson's peculiar calligraphy, said at once—

"No, Miss Gibson. I have never seen it before."

"Ah!" said she. "We are getting on at last. Well, this letter I answered at once, giving my full sanction to the proposal, and there and then went out and posted

it myself. On my return, I found you on my doorstep most strenuously denying that I lived or ever had lived in my very own house. No, no, I want no further explanation or apology. You have been exceedingly rude to-day, all through your misdirected zeal on behalf of Miss White. If you persist in encouraging her to fathom a mystery which, for sufficiently good reasons, ought to remain a mystery—if mystery, after all, be the proper term for it—you will only succeed in making yourself supremely ridiculous and uncomfortable in the end. Once more, I beg of you to take an old woman's advice, and have done with it. These are serious words, and, in any case, are my final ones upon the subject. You will probably never see me again, for now that Eleanor is launched upon a career of her own I am thinking of going abroad, and—but I have said quite

enough. Good-bye, Mr King. In spite of all that has been said and done here to-day, I have nothing but good wishes for you. Good-bye." And before the astonished man could realize the full meaning of her words, he found himself out on the dusty road again, and, he was fain to admit to himself, no wiser than before.

"Well, I'm dashed!" said he. "Of all the quiet take-downs! There is not an ounce of conceit left in me, and half an hour ago I was fairly bursting with it. Shall I take her advice, and drop the whole business? There is some mystery at the bottom of it all; she frankly admitted as much. But is it worth my while to attempt to solve it? And what have I to do with unprofessional mysteries, anyhow? Just to humour the whim of a pretty girl, too. No, I'll be hanged if I bother my head any more about it."

And firm in that resolution he retraced his steps in the direction of the station, and soon was on his way back to London town.

Meanwhile, after a tearful leave-taking at "The Hollies"—which need not be dwelt upon in these pages—a four-wheeled cab, containing Miss White and her small belongings, had driven up to No. 99, Curzon Street, Mayfair.

CHAPTER VI

THAT the coming of Miss White was expected became speedily manifest. The massive door seemed to open wide of its own accord as she mounted the steps. The polite footman of the previous day was now almost obsequious.

Miss Bruce was out, he at once explained, but she had left instructions that Miss White was to receive every attention upon her arrival. Indeed, Parkyns, Miss Bruce's maid, was now waiting, as he indicated by a gesture, at the head of the staircase, to show Miss White to her own private apartment. Her luggage would

follow in the course of a minute or two.

Miss White was not the sort of girl to be easily thrown from her mental balance, and, though she wondered greatly at this somewhat ceremonious reception of her unimportant self, there was nothing in her outer presentment to indicate the feeling as she tripped up the broad staircase.

Parkyns, a comely young woman, rosy-cheeked and buxom, received her with a smile.

"This way, Miss White," said she, "this way;" and straightway led her into a dainty little bedroom, upholstered and curtained in pink and white.

"This is your room, miss," said Parkyns, "and a very pleasant room it is. The door here"—and she opened it—"leads into Miss Bruce's boudoir, and her bedroom is on the other side. So, you see,

"you will be together like, and very comfortable."

To any young lady who had had previous experience as a "lady companion" this would have appeared very strange language, but Miss White accepted it simply and frankly as a mere matter of course, and even surveyed the appointments of the boudoir with a critical eye.

"That picture, Parkyns," said she, "is hung a little bit too low. Still, take it all in all, it is a very charming room."

"Oh, indeed it is," said Parkyns. "Just what I said meself first time I saw it. But wouldn't you like to look over the house a bit? Miss Bruce said I was to show you, if you wanted to."

"Why, of course," said Miss White, unpinning her hat and throwing it upon a chair. "I should very much like to look over the house."

"This is the droring-room," said Parkyns, a moment later. "It seems a bit stuffy-like, don't you think, miss?"

Miss White gave one sweeping and comprehensive glance about the room. It was of imposing proportions. An immense crystal chandelier was suspended from a painted ceiling, whereon a group of Olympian deities, both male and female, dispored themselves right merrily. The panelled walls were similarly decorated. The gilt furniture, upholstered in faded tapestry, the Aubusson carpet, the Louis Seize console tables and cabinets, with Sèvres ornaments, the ormolu clock, with china plaques, upon the mantelpiece, the heavy curtains of yellow brocade hanging before gilded sashes reaching to the floor, with their chiselled spagnolettes, all were of a piece. The room might have been transplanted as it stood from the Faubourg

St Germain. But there was an air of desolation and desuetude over it all.

"It is stuffy," said Miss White. "Why don't they push the curtains back, and throw the windows open wide?"

"Lor' bless you, don't ask me," said Parkyns. "This is a home of mist'ry—this house is. You'll find out soon enough, and then judge for yourself. Come and look at the dining-room now, and if that won't give you the creeps I don't know what will."

With that she led the way down the staircase to the entrance hall, and opened a door on the right.

"Step inside, miss," said Parkyns. "A chamber of 'orrers, I call it; and this is where you will have to take your meals along with Miss Bruce and the governor; and just you wait until you see 'im, miss."

"Is he so very dreadful, then? What is he like?"

"I couldn't tell you what he is like, miss. Words wouldn't run to it. You just wait and see for yourself. And now what do you think of this for a place to eat in, anyhow?"

Miss White looked about her in wonder and dismay. The room itself was sombre enough, in all conscience, and in striking contrast to the somewhat flamboyant apartment she had just quitted. Walls and ceiling alike were panelled in old oak. The uncarpeted floor was of the same material, the furniture almost ecclesiastical in its severity, the window hangings funereal, and the whole colour scheme of the apartment would have been depressing enough of itself had not the trickiness of it "leaped to the eyes" at once. For this sombre background had been cunningly devised to throw into greater relief a group

of pictorial horrors upon the walls. A naked St Sebastian pierced by arrows; St Lawrence stretched upon a gridiron with the leaping flames beneath him; St Peter, head downwards upon the cross, and half a dozen other lurid examples of the gentle art of martyrdom.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Miss White.

"Ain't it awful?" returned Parkyns. "Why I stay in such a place as this I don't know; upon me word I don't."

"But Miss Bruce? She surely——"

"Ah! there you are, miss. She's all right. A nicer lady never breathed, and but for her I'd a took me hook the very first day I set foot in the house, indeed I would. But the master—oh, Lord!"

"Why can't you tell me what he is like? Surely you can give me some sort of an impression?"

"Well, miss, I can and I can't. He ain't

so very terrible to look at, but it's his manner is so strange. He never speaks to any of us, except the butler, and he's another mist'ry, he is, does just as he likes in the house, and the master acts as though he was afraid of him. I can't make it out at all though, when it comes to that, he seems frightened at everything. He jumps if anybody speaks to him casual-like, and does such funny things, and never goes out of the house, and never has anybody here, and, upon me word, I believe he's off his head, indeed I do. Lord ! here's the butler himself."

A tall, thin, hawk-eyed, hawk-nosed, and clean-shaven man had sprung suddenly from nowhere, as it seemed to Miss White. At sight of her, however, he stared open-mouthed, as at a ghost.

" This is Miss White, Simpson ; Miss Bruce's new companion," said Parkyns.

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"Oh! ah! indeed," replied the butler, and with another half-frightened look at Miss White he left the room.

"Why, whatever is the matter with him, miss?" said Parkyns. "He seemed to have quite a turn like when he saw you."

"Oh, I am sure I don't know and don't care," said Miss White. "I've had quite enough of this room. Have you any others to show me?"

"Oh yes—the library. Miss Bruce told me particularly to show you the library. A nice room that is. This way, across the hall at the back. No 'anky-panky in there. 'Eaps of beautiful books up to the very ceiling," and she threw the door open and stood aside for Miss White to enter.

It was, indeed, a fine spacious room, apparently built out at the back of the main building, for it was practically ceiled with

stained glass, through which the shafts of a westerly sun struggled brokenly through in strange kaleidoscopic patterns upon tier upon tier of sumptuously-bound books in mahogany cases, reaching from floor to cornice. There were no windows, and but the solitary door by which she had entered. Indeed, she found herself pleasantly immured within four solid walls of books, and, turning to Parkyns, said—

“ This is charming. I don’t care to make any further explorations to-day. When do you expect Miss Bruce back ? ”

“ Well,” she said, “ pretty soon, miss. But as she has gone out shopping, you know what ‘ pretty soon ’ generally means. She is sure, though, to be back in time to dress for dinner, say, in an hour from now.”

“ Very well ; I will remain here until she comes, and amuse myself with a book ” —saying which Miss White leisurely selected

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a volume from the crowded shelves, buried herself in the capacious depths of an easy-chair, and shortly became engrossed in the work before her.

She had been reading for, perhaps, half an hour, when she suddenly became conscious of a human presence in the room. She glanced over the edge of her book, and saw a strange, weird, masculine figure—long-limbed and cadaverous—go slinking rapidly and noiselessly by, without looking either to the right or left of him. Her heart fairly stood still, as the uncanny apparition walked straight to the farther end of the room, paused for a second in front of a centre bookcase, which suddenly appeared to revolve as upon pivots. Then, to her amazement, she saw the tall figure glide through the opening and suddenly sink out of sight. At the same instant the bookcase swung noiselessly back into its

place again, and the room was as before.

It had all passed so quickly, so silently, that at first she rubbed her eyes with astonishment. Had she been dreaming? Oh no, her eyes had seen what they had seen, and her brain becoming quickly astir with curiosity, she leaped from her chair, hastily crossed the room, and was busily examining the mysterious bookcase when she heard a loud "Ahem!" behind her. She started like a guilty thing, faced about, and found the footman standing just inside the door.

"Miss Bruce has returned," said he, "and would like to see you at once in her boudoir."

Miss Bruce greeted her effusively as she entered.

"I am so sorry to have kept you waiting," said she; "but you know what shopping

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means. It is such tedious and tiresome work. I hope you like your room."

"Oh," it is quite charming," said Miss White, still big-eyed with wonder at the scene she had just witnessed ; "one could not help liking it."

"And has Parkyns shown you over the house ? I told her to do so."

"Yes, or at least she has taken me into a few of the rooms. I like the library very much."

"Ah ! I thought you would. And the dining-room ? "

"Oh ! that is simply horrid. Those pictures, Miss Bruce, those awful pictures ! "

"Yes, they are too shocking for words, my dear. My brother is so eccentric, not to say morbid, in his tastes. But don't let them destroy your appetite. They are but painted canvases, after all. You will

become accustomed to them after a while,
as I have done."

Miss White shook her head incredulously.
"I don't think so," said she. "Your
brother must, indeed, have morbid tastes,
as you say. What is he like, Miss Bruce ?
I am not easily frightened, but——"

"Oh," she replied, with a laugh that was
obviously forced, "he is a gentle enough
creature. You will meet him at dinner,
and can study him at your leisure. Pro-
bably he will be so self-absorbed that he
will not even be aware of your presence
at the table. And now to change the
subject. I have brought home a dress I
wish you particularly to wear this evening.
A number of other costumes will follow
to-morrow. We shall be going out a good
deal together, I dare say, and this addition
to your wardrobe will not come amiss.
Please do not look so astonished, Miss

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White. I have fancies, as well as my brother, but mine are healthy ones, thank God ! and if you wish to please me you must put up with my little whims without demur. Now, run in to your room, like a good girl, you will find the dress there, and make yourself look as nice as possible."

Full of new wonderment, Miss White at once obeyed. This was in very truth a home of mystery, as Parkyns had said. As she closed the door behind her, her delighted eyes fell upon the bed, upon which was spread a ravishing confection of corn-coloured silk, daintily trimmed with black and gossamer-like Spanish point. Her heart went pit-a-pat at sight of so much loveliness, and within five minutes she was inside the wondrous thing. Marvellous to relate, it fitted her to a nicety. Surely there was magic in all this. She surveyed herself in the glass with a look of triumph.

She was more than lovely ; she was superb. Heedless now of the meaning of it all, she cast off the bewitching thing tenderly, while with hot haste she completed an elaborate toilette. To her magnificent hair she gave unwonted attention ; and when fully attired at last, she stepped into the adjoining boudoir, Miss Bruce, already dressed, gave a start of pleased surprise.

" My dear Miss White," said she, " you look like a young queen ; " and to herself she added, " the resemblance is wonderful —wonderful."

" I wonder," said the delighted girl, " what the good people at ' The Hollies ' would say to see me in such a gown as this."

" They would be pleased, I am sure."

" And as for poor Miss Gibson, she, I know, would fall down dead in a fit." And Miss White laughed at the thought.

" Oh ! " said Miss Bruce, " speaking of

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Miss Gibson, I have just received a letter from her, in which she heartily approves of the step you have taken, and states that she is now going abroad for an indefinite period. She sends her love to you, and—but there goes the dinner-gong. I will show you her letter later on. Come!"

They descended the stairs together, in silence, and entered the dining-room. Though still broad daylight, the window curtains had been closely drawn, and wax candles burned in tall silver candelabra upon the dinner-table. The butler stood by the sideboard, and stared in open-mouthed wonder at this strange and lovely apparition in corn-coloured silk. Miss Bruce took her seat at one end of the table, placing Miss White on the left, with her back to the most repellent of the pictorial horrors on the walls.

For a moment the chair at the head of

the table remained unoccupied, then a door at the farther end of the room opened, and a tall figure in evening dress glided, rather than walked across to the table, and took the vacant seat.

He was a cadaverous, clean-shaven, hollow-cheeked man, with shaggy iron-grey hair and jet-black eyes, set well back in their sockets, and just visible beneath heavy, drooping eyelids. In him Miss White instantly recognised the man who had so mysteriously entered, and disappeared from, the library an hour before. She had anticipated this from the first, and for her he now possessed a deadly fascination.

As Miss Bruce had predicted, he took no notice of Miss White, however, and leisurely unfolded his napkin as the soup was placed before him by the butler. Then, suddenly, the presence of a third person seemed to dawn upon him, and he felt for

an eyeglass that was dangling at the end of a black ribbon from his neck, carefully adjusted it, and turned it in the direction of Miss White. Then an extraordinary thing happened. His jaw dropped, and his eyes flamed with a sudden terror from their cavernous depths.

"Mother of God!" he exclaimed; "who is this woman?"

"Merely Miss White, my new companion, of whom I spoke yesterday," said Miss Bruce, in a strangely agitated voice.

"It is a lie!" he said, leaping to his feet. "Have I not eyes—can I not see?" and, turning fiercely upon Miss White, he shouted; "tell me, are you Eleanor, or are you not?"

"Of course, I am Eleanor," said the now thoroughly affrighted girl.

"You hear, Doris, she admits it. It is her voice—she is wearing the same dress as

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when—what devil's work is this? I thought—I was sure she was——”

“ He suddenly clutched wildly at his neck-tie, uttered a few inarticulate sounds, reeled, and, but for the interposing arms of the butler, would have fallen like a log to the floor.

CHAPTER VII

UPON his return to the Middle Temple that same afternoon, Mr King found a letter lying upon his table.

“ The gentleman wrote it here himself,” the office boy explained. “ He called three times to see you, sir, and seemed a bit anxious like.”

“ Oh, indeed ! ” said Mr King, breaking open the envelope. It was a hasty scrawl, and read :—

“ DEAR OLD REX,—Back again, and have been all the afternoon trying to dig you out. I am stopping at the Cecil, and have a very decent sort of an American

with me (we crossed together) who wants a little legal advice. I know that you are quite capable of giving him any amount of good legal advice, and as I want to see my old pal Rex again, I thought it would make a happy and judicious blending of business and pleasure if you could see your way to turning up at the Cecil to dinner at seven. Don't take the trouble to dress; we shall not. Afterwards, over a good cigar in the smoking room, my friend (whose name, by the way, is Blake—Rufus C. Blake) will unfold to you a curious story. He has plenty of money, and it may be worth your while to take up his little matter, especially as I think it would be quite in your line.

"Don't fail to come—that's a good fellow.—Yours ever, TOMMY T."

"Good old Tommy Toshington again, as I live," said Mr King. "Why, of course,

the last I heard of him he was shooting grizzly bears and things out in the Rocky Mountains. And so he has picked up some wild American who is in need of legal advice, has he ? It is just like Tommy to bring him straight to me. Oh ! yes. I will go up to the Cecil, of course. Seven o'clock eh ! " and he looked at his watch. " Good, I can manage that very nicely."

So it befell that upon the stroke of seven, in the vestibule of the Hotel Cecil, he found himself shaking hands right heartily once more with his old college chum Tommy Toshington, a blond and breezy young fellow of about his own age. This done—

" And now permit me," said the latter, " to introduce my friend Mr Rufus C. Blake of Boston."

A very presentable and well-groomed man of about fifty, was Mr Blake. Beyond

a certain alertness both in manner and in speech, and perhaps, too, in the formal cut of his closely-trimmed moustache—there was little about him to indicate his nationality. Moreover, there was not a single diamond visible anywhere on his person, and no miniature "Stars and Stripes" peeped from his breast coat pocket, and Mr King spoke but the simple truth when he said that he was greatly pleased to make Mr Blake's acquaintance.

"The pleasure, then, is reciprocal, I can assure you," said the latter. "I have been looking forward to this meeting with the keenest pleasure, for Mr Toshington, here, has spoken of you in terms which——"

"Were doubtless greatly exaggerated," interposed Mr Toshington. "It suffices that you two chaps now know one another, so cut the cackle until after dinner," and he led the way to the dining-room.

An hour or so later, when cigars were lighted, in a cosy corner of the smoking-room, Mr Toshington spoke again.

"Now, Mr Blake," said he, "to business. Dear old Rex, as we always called him at Oxford, has a very pretty gift, as I told you, of seeing through things, and he may be of great service to you. In any case, your little story will interest him, I am sure."

"Well," said Mr Blake, removing the cigar from his mouth, "it is a tangled-up sort of affair, and I don't know whether we can get to the bottom of it or not. I should be glad to do so, for there is a good bit of money hanging to it, and the thing must be either cleared up, or we must let it slide. You see, I want to find out whether a cousin of mine named Felix Featherstone is dead, or is knocking about the planet somewhere with another's man wife. If

I can prove that he is dead it will mean £100,000 to me. If he isn't dead—well, then, irrespective of the other man's wife, he comes into the money. In the meantime, that bit of money is locked up, and is, so to speak, nobody's property."

"Through the stipulations of a will?" asked Mr King.

"Exactly; through the stipulations of a will made by our uncle, John Featherstone, of San Francisco, from whom we neither of us ever had any expectations whatever. As a matter of fact, we never knew that he had any money worth mentioning, to leave. His only near relatives were a trader, since dead, who was the father of the missing man, Felix Featherstone, and a sister, my mother, who is also dead. The situation is plain enough. You quite follow me, Mr King?"

"Oh, quite so," said Mr King, knocking

off the ash from the end of his cigar, " and had he died intestate, the missing man and yourself would have been the natural heirs to his estate ? "

" Precisely. But he did make a will, you see, leaving us £100,000 each, with residue. But, for some reason, which I don't affect to understand, he had a conviction that Felix Featherstone, whom I believed to have been dead for nearly eighteen years, was still alive ; and until I can absolutely prove that the man is dead that £100,000 is hung up, and of no use to anybody."

" Ah ! just so," said Mr King. " The situation is an awkward one. May I ask to whom the £100,000 will revert in case your inquiries prove unsuccessful ? "

" I really don't know, as no provision is made in the will drawn up by himself for such a contingency. I dare say," he added,

with a laugh, "that it would then pass in the customary way into the pockets of certain enterprising gentlemen of your profession."

"Oh! I dare say," said Mr King, laughing in turn. "But, of course, we must prevent that, if possible."

"And divert a bit of it in the direction of the Middle Temple, for instance," suggested Mr Toshington.

"That phase of the question is not under discussion. As usual, there is a little too much inconsequence in your methods, Mr Tommy T. And now, may I ask, Mr Blake, what reason you have had for believing this Felix Featherstone to be dead. Eighteen years is a very long time. That takes us back to the year 1886."

"Oh! so it does. I have made a slight mistake; it was in 1887 that the Opéra Comique, in Paris, was burned, and it has

always been my impression that he perished on that occasion."

"Merely your impression?" said Mr King, in a tone of surprise.

"It was never a certainty; and that is a matter I want definitely cleared up. I received the impression through a number of circumstances clearly pointing in that direction. I pieced this and that together, and jumped to a conclusion which, upon the whole, appears to be a reasonable one, as I have never seen or heard from him since."

"May I inquire as to the nature of these circumstances?"

"I shall come to that presently. My cousin and I were on the best of terms, and during his journeys abroad we corresponded at frequent intervals. He was always crossing backward and forward between the two countries, living now in

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London, now in Paris, or some other European capital. During that period I was in constant touch with him. He was an extremely handsome young fellow, with a deuce of a penchant for the ladies, which, in the end, I fear, led to his undoing. That is a phase of the matter which I wish particularly to have cleared up, as it has an important bearing upon the other. The last letter I received from him was in May, 1887, and was dated from the Langham Hotel, in London. It was full of ravings about a certain beautiful lady he had met in Cairo the winter before, and had accidentally encountered again in London. It would appear that she was a married woman, unhappily mated to a man whom my cousin described as a 'lanky crackpot,' who found his sole delight in mummies and—."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Mr King, starting bolt upright in his chair.

Mr Blake looked at him in surprise.

"Why, what's the matter ? ", he asked.

"I'm interested ; that is all. What was the name of this 'crack-pot' ? "

"Bruce."

"Lived in Curzon Street ? "

"That is quite correct. You do seem interested now, that's a cold fact. Know the man ? "

"Not personally. I've heard of him, though, as being a very eccentric man."

"Very rich, isn't he ? "

"He has that reputation."

"Ever hear anything about his wife ? "

"I wasn't aware he had one. He has a sister who lives with him."

"Yes. I know that," said Mr Blake.
"A very nice woman. I met her once."

Mr King seemed more and more astonished. "The deuce you did," said he.
"How did that come about ? "

"Well, you see, not hearing anything from my cousin for nearly a year, I came over here to make inquiries, and interviewed her."

"Why, what could she tell you about your cousin ?"

"Not much ; only I ascertained that on the day that Felix left the Langham Hotel Mrs Bruce disappeared from her home in Curzon Street, and had not since been heard of. You follow me ?"

"Good Lord, yes. And then ?"

"Well, then, I made a few other discreet inquiries, and ascertained that a couple answering to their description had been traced to a certain hotel in Paris ; that they had visited the Opéra Comique the night it was burned, and never returned. So that the natural supposition was——"

"That they had perished together. By Jove ! this is indeed a strange story ; and

it interests me very deeply," said Mr King, his every nerve now tingling with excitement. "By the way, in the course of your investigations, did you ascertain if there was a child?"

Mr Blake seemed surprised at the question.

"What child? Whose child? What has a child got to do with my cousin?"

"Oh! nothing, of course. It only occurred to me that Mrs Bruce might have had a child by the marriage."

"I doubt it. I never heard of any. And now," pursued Mr Blake, dismissing the subject as one of no possible importance to him, "you have the bald facts of the case before you. I accepted the evidence as fairly conclusive at the time; and as the years rolled round, and no further tidings of Felix ever came to hand, I dropped the whole thing from my mind, and should

never have reopened the question but for my uncle's will. Now, of course, I am bound to go into it again. I will do it as quietly as possible, so as not to revive a scandal, which, I think, was hushed up at the time ; but there must be an exhaustive inquiry this time, Mr King, and it only remains for you to say if you will assist me in that inquiry."

"With all my heart and energy, Mr Blake," was the emphatic reply.

Then Tommy Toshington looked up and said, "Now that is settled, let us, for goodness' sake, have a Scotch and Polly over it."

CHAPTER VIII

MISS WHITE's first dinner in Curzon Street threatened to come to an abrupt termination, even before she had so much as tasted her soup. Dismayed at the scene she had just witnessed, she hurriedly rose from the table, as Miss Bruce, with a white face, hastened to her brother's assistance.

The butler had placed him in an easy-chair.

"It's nothing very serious, m'm," said he; "he's had several attacks like this lately. He calls it vertigo, and says it comes from the liver, and is not worth mentioning. He'll be all right in a minute

or two." And even as he spoke, Mr Bruce started up, and looked in a dazed sort of way about him.

"Are you better, John?" his sister asked. "What on earth upset you so? What strange fancy came into your head? You have nearly frightened the life out of this young lady here."

He passed his hand over his brow in a bewildered fashion, and lifted his eyes timidly, almost shamefacedly, in the direction of Miss White.

"Who did you say this lady was?" he asked.

"My new companion, Miss White. I told you all about her yesterday, don't you remember?"

He made a painful effort at reflection. Then said he—

"Of course, of course. Pray accept my apologies, Miss White. I am very sorry.

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Pray be seated again." And he rose and walked to his own chair at the head of the table. "I have strange fancies at times. I really must consult a doctor, Doris."

"You certainly should do so, John," she replied, in a kindly tone. "Such strange outbreaks, at your own table, too! It is a serious thing, John."

"It is, it is. I am very sorry, for this young lady's sake. But I was preoccupied when I came in to dinner, and I did not at once perceive the presence of a third party. Then, too, I imagined at first that —" and he suddenly checked himself. "Yes, yes, I really must consult a doctor." With that he relapsed into silence.

Miss White felt very ill at ease during the remainder of the dinner. A lugubrious business, in all conscience! A hundred times she wished herself back at "The Hollies" again. Clearly she seemed pre-

destined to live in an atmosphere of mystery, which had suddenly thickened, and at this rate would soon become intolerable. Miss Bruce, too, seemed constrained and fidgety. The butler came and went noiselessly, refilling Mr Bruce's glass at frequent intervals, and although the latter uttered never a further word, Miss White was conscious that he was surveying her furtively and unceasingly. She could almost feel, as it were, his glance wandering over her face, and taking in every little detail of the dress she wore. When at times she glanced in his direction, and intercepted a look, it seemed full of mingled perplexity and alarm. It was all very mysterious and embarrassing, and it was a relief, indeed, when the sombre repast came to an end at last, and the gaunt figure at the head of the table rose, bowed formally, and slunk away as he had come. Then Miss

Bruce and her "companion" returned to the boudoir in silence.

The latter was the first to speak.

"Miss Bruce," said she, abruptly, "I am really afraid that I cannot stay with you any longer."

"You must not say that, my dear girl," was the reply. "I am genuinely distressed at what has happened, but you must not attach undue importance to it. I intimated that my brother was somewhat eccentric. He is, you can now easily perceive, in no sense companionable, and for that reason I have led a very lonely existence here. The thought of losing you now would be unendurable. Dismiss the whole unpleasant business from your mind. He is full of hallucinations, but they need not concern you. He knows you now. In the course of a day or two he will become accustomed to your presence at the table."

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"No; I am sure not," said Miss White.

"What cause have you for thinking so?"

"The cause is obvious, Miss Bruce. The sight of my face nearly sent him into a fit. Why was that?"

"Goodness knows! I cannot answer for his vagaries, Miss White."

"Vagaries!—no, no. He recognised my face in an instant, and the sight of it terrified him. There is no getting away from the fact."

"His distorted imagination, perhaps."

"Pardon me, Miss Bruce, for my plain speaking. It is due to me that I should speak plainly. But there is no question in this of a distorted imagination. Why did he ask me if my name was Eleanor?"

"I do not know," said Miss Bruce, now obviously ill at ease. "He says and does such strange things."

"But in this instance he hit the nail

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accurately on the head, for my name is Eleanor, as you are aware. Did he ever know another Eleanor, a woman resembling me, perhaps ? ”

“ It is possible. Everything is possible in this world.”

“ Just so. But do you know—have you ever heard of any such woman ? ”

“ It is possible, I say, that he may have met such a person. There are chapters in his life of which I know nothing. It would seem, in any case, to be a plausible explanation of his strange conduct.”

Miss White shook her head. It was plain that she was far from being satisfied with the answer.

“ Why, too, should he have said, ‘ the same voice ’ ? ”

“ A mere fancy, I suppose.”

“ And ‘ the same dress,’ alluding to the

one I am now wearing. That, to me, seemed
the strangest thing of all."

"I quite differ from you there," said Miss Bruce. "To me it is the clearest proof that throughout he was labouring under some strange delusion."

"I cannot bring myself to believe so," said Miss White, doggedly ; "for during the whole of the dinner his eyes were more or less fixed on this dress. For him it seemed to exercise some deadly fascination. I don't understand it. There is an air of mystery about the whole thing that alarms me. And, if you will pardon my saying so, there is something uncanny, too, about this house. It has got on my nerves. You, personally, are very good and kind, and in this, too, there is a mystery, for at moments I cannot bring myself to believe that I am not really talking to that dear old soul, Miss Gibson."

"Of Barnet?"

"Of Barnet, yes."

For the first time during the interview Miss Bruce laughed—laughed quite heartily.

"Miss White," said she, "you are quite as bad as my brother with his hallucinations. Your brain seems full of morbid fancies to-night. This is not the terrible house you imagine it to be. It will be all the better, however, for your bright presence, and as for your leaving me because I chance to have rather a feeble-minded brother, that I will not listen to for one single second. So dismiss the idea, once and for all, from your mind. Never run counter to your interests, my dear girl, and your present interests all lie in the direction of remaining here with a good friend such as you will find me to be. Don't indulge in morbid fancies and wild

imaginings. Simply put your trust in me, and all will be well. Will you do so, Eleanor?"

Taken all aback by the only too apparent genuineness of this appeal, Miss White, for the moment at least, threw all her suspicions to the winds, and simply said—

"Miss Bruce, I will."

"Very well, then. Now go to the piano, and let me hear you play."

Miss White at once complied. She was an admirable musician, and an hour passed away very quickly. Miss Bruce was warmly congratulating her on her proficiency when a sudden knock came at the door, and the butler, with a white, scared face, entered the room.

"Can I speak to you privately, m'm, just for a minute?" said he.

"Why, certainly, Simpson," said she. "Please excuse me, Miss White." And with

that she stepped out into the corridor and closed the door behind her.

Within a moment or two she returned, in great agitation.

"I must leave you for a little while," said she. "Try and amuse yourself. There are plenty of books and periodicals lying about the room. If Parkyns comes in, tell her I shall have no need for her to-night." Saying which she once more left the room.'

Greatly wondering what had happened, and with all her old fears crowding back upon her again, she picked up a book and endeavoured in vain to read. An hour passed. She threw down the book, and paced the floor, her brain in a whirl of excited fancies. What could have happened to keep Miss Bruce so long away? Twice she went out on the corridor and listened, but she heard no sound. The

stillness of death seemed to pervade the whole house. The minutes sped on. Again she essayed to read, but she saw only words—words without any significance or meaning to her. Suddenly the door-handle turned. The volume dropped to the floor, and she started to her feet, only to see Parkyns enter the room.

Still, even her coming was something. It broke the long tension of waiting. Perhaps she knew the cause of Miss Bruce's protracted absence.

"Has anything happened in the house, Parkyns?" she asked.

"I fancy there has," she replied, "but I can't justly make out what, meself. You see it was my night out, and I was a bit late, and hurried upstairs. Where is Miss Bruce?"

"That is what I should like to know. The butler came, all in a fright, for her an

hour and a half ago, and I've been alone here ever since. I am sure something dreadful must have happened."

"Oh! I daresay it is the master again. He's always upsetting the place. I've got sort of used to it—hardened like, though I do get the creeps sometimes. I wonder when she will come back. I feel a bit tired meself."

"Oh! she told me you needn't wait, as she wouldn't require your services to-night."

"Thank goodness! Then I'm off to bed. Take my tip, miss, and do the same. Don't trouble your head about nothing in this house. Miss Bruce may not be back for hours. Don't you wait. Besides, it may make her cross to find you up when she comes. Anyhow, I'm off. Good-night, miss." And the door closed behind her.

Despite Parkyns' advice Miss White waited on. Another hour passed, and her eyelids were beginning to droop with weariness, when Miss Bruce, white, dishevelled, with wide-staring eyes full of horror, suddenly burst into the room.

"Oh ! my God ! my God ! What is to be done now ? " she exclaimed. Then, perceiving Miss White huddled up in an easy-chair, she added, almost piteously—

"Why are you here so late ? Get to bed, child, get to bed, and leave me alone. Go ! go ! "

CHAPTER IX

MR KING's ruminations were of a complex character as he lay awake until nearly cock-crow on the night of his interview with Mr Blake. It is probable that in the ordinary course he would have declined at once the latter's suggestion that he should interest himself in the fate of his cousin, Felix Featherstone. Had he not business enough in hand already and to spare, thought he. But the contingency, however remote, that Miss White's interests might be affected by the inquiry the American was determined to set on foot was a stimulus he found it impossible to

ignore, or even banish for one moment from his mind.

The Long Vacation, he reflected, was near at hand. Several unimportant briefs he might in charity hand over to less fortunate juniors of his acquaintance. Even the great criminal case he had in hand might, upon some plea or other, be postponed until the next sessions. Moreover, the proposition appealed to him very strongly. It was rife with possibilities. There was an element of romance in it, too, that was a fascination in itself. Besides, from a monetary point of view he was the gainer, not the loser, for his remuneration rested entirely with himself. After all, he had given his promise to Mr Blake, and that was the end of it.

There was now but one debatable point left in his reflections. Should he, following the usual method, engage the services

of a firm of solicitors to assist him in his investigations, or score off his own bat? It was, in a sense, a private commission, and quite out of the beaten course of procedure. Besides, it was a business of a delicate nature, and the fewer investigators the better. That decided it, and a further resolve he also took, that for the present at least, and until he learned, in the course of the inquiry, whether it affected Miss White's interests in any way, directly or otherwise, he would not broach the subject to that very charming young lady. Then he remembered his appointment with Mr Blake at ten o'clock, and, dismissing the whole subject from his mind, slept, at last, the sleep of the just.

Punctually to the minute—as is the wont of the average American citizen—Mr Blake put in an appearance at Mr King's chambers in Pump Court.

"Mr Blake," said the latter, when the preliminary greetings were over, "I have slept upon this thing, and have formulated a course of action. I may add, for your information, however, that in order to devote my whole attention to this inquiry, I have been compelled to put other important business aside."

Mr Blake at once interrupted him.

"I quite understand that, Mr King, and you equally understand, or rather you will recall, what I said to you in parting last evening—that money is of no consideration in this matter, and that you will be amply recouped for whatever loss you may sustain by neglecting other business ; and it is my wish and purpose, before proceeding any further, to write you out a preliminary cheque for £500." And with this he whipped out a cheque-book from his pocket.

"The amount is excessive," pleaded Mr King.

"Not at all," said Mr Blake, reaching across the table for pen and ink, "for the case is an urgent one, and time is worth about a dollar a minute to me just now."

He wrote the cheque, and passed it over to Mr King ; then referring to his pocket-book, he said—

"Here is the last letter I received from my cousin. It is the one I spoke to you about last night. You had better read it over carefully yourself, and see if I omitted anything that may serve as a further clue."

Mr King read the letter over twice, with critical deliberation.

"I only notice one thing," he said, looking up at last, "and it strikes me as somewhat peculiar. He says here," and he referred to the letter again, 'Madly in love as I am, and sympathetic as she is,

I do not seem to make any appreciable headway with her. There is, yet undissolved, a certain amount of ice in her moral texture. She still discourses to me of the sanctity of marriage vows. However, I do not despair of bringing her to the completed melting mood in the end, and then, anything may happen. So be prepared for surprises.'"

"Yes, well," said Mr Blake, "what other construction can you put upon it than that the melting mood arrived in due season? Felix's persistency was crowned in the end with success, and the pair bolted to Paris. Nothing, to me, seems clearer than that."

"From a surface point of view, and, judging only by the data you have given me, such a deduction is not only logical, but irresistibly so. It still remains to be proved whether your data are absolutely correct or not."

"Oh!" said Mr Blake, reflectively stroking his chin; "well, of course, there you are! I hastily accepted as true what has not yet been conclusively proved to be true. I quite follow you there; but I certainly do not follow you in thinking there is anything peculiar in Felix's allusion to the woman's initial scruples. Still, I am not going to argue the matter. It is now in your hands. You have all the necessary particulars."

"Except one," said Mr King. "The name of the hotel in Paris to which they were traced?"

"Ah! just so. Well, it was a small hotel called the Hotel du Prince Albert, in the Rue St Hyacinthe, a quiet street near the Church of St Roche. Their motive in going to an out-of-the-way place like that was to avoid observation, of course."

"Oh, certainly," said Mr King, making

a careful note of the address. "Yes; well," he added, "that is all I require for the present, Mr Blake."

"Then I will leave you," said the latter, rising and looking at his watch. "I have another appointment, and shall be just in time to keep it. You will always find me at the Hotel Cecil, you know. Good-day, Mr King."

Mr King, once more alone, folded up the cheque and shoved it casually into his waistcoat pocket, meantime wondering upon whom, among many needy friends in the various Inns of Court, he could bestow superfluous briefs. He jotted down a number of names upon a slip of paper, deleted a few, then set himself down to write to the selected ones. This done, he rang for the office-boy, gave him certain instructions, and a few minutes later took a cab westward.

His destination was the Langham Hotel. There he made inquiries to which he received nothing but head-shakings.

"Eighteen years ago! Many thousand guests had come and gone since then," but yielding to Mr King's insistence, the manager consented to make instant inquiries. This, however, took an unconscionable time, and, in the interval, Mr King strolled as far as Curzon Street and carefully surveyed every window in No. 99, hoping for a glimpse of "The White Girl."

"No good," said he. "I've drawn a blank. I've half a notion, though, to go and ring the bell, and ask to see her on some pretext or another, *mais, à quoi bon?* Dash it all, old man, chuck it! Your—well—let us call it admiration for that girl will tangle up your business instincts, and you may come a cropper in consequence.

Still, after all, it is an incentive, and let it rest at that."

So back he went to the Langham, where a dusty ledger was in wait for him, and from this he gathered that one Felix Featherstone had quitted the hotel, quite unceremoniously, on the 22nd of May, 1887, leaving an unpaid bill behind him, and considerable luggage, which might, or might not be still on the premises.

Mr King said at once that the bill would be liquidated upon production of the luggage in question, and ordered lunch pending inquiries.

Diligent search was made in the store-rooms, and at last several trunks, a portmanteau, and dressing-case, were unearthed. They each and all bore the initials "F.F." in staring white letters.

The manager seemed surprised. "He must have been a very good customer,"

said he, "or those goods would have been impounded long ago. You see, I am but a recent comer here."

Mr King made no comment on this. He merely wrote out a cheque for the unpaid account, and directed the luggage to be sent to his chambers in the Middle Temple.

"Strange thing," he said, on his way out, "that Mr Blake knew nothing of this. The contents of those boxes may throw any amount of light upon the mystery. In any case there is a small asset or two to set against the £500 cheque."

He walked about aimlessly for a time. Then he was seized with a sudden inspiration.

"Yes," said he, "I'll go up to Barnet again, and chance it."

Arrived at Barnet an hour later he went at once to "The Salisbury Arms," and asked for "Boots."

Presently "Boots" turned up, with a puzzled face.

"What did you mean by telling me fairy tales the other day?" asked Mr King, in his very sternest manner.

"I didn't tell you no fairy tales, sir," retorted "Boots," with an injured air. "About the lady in the kerridge, do you mean, sir?"

"About the lady in the carriage. Yes."

"Lor' lummy, sir! that was right enough. I think she must have spotted you a-talking with me, for I 'eared as how she turned back at the next corner, and so to the cottage again. There is a lane at the back of that cottage, sir."

"Oh, indeed!"

"Yes. With an entrance into the rear garden, sir."

"Come, no nonsense with me, my man."

"There's no blighted nonsense about

it, sir. I simply know what I know, and what I told you. Take it or leave it ; it's nothink to me. I'll tell you this, though, straight. No good of going up to the cottage again."

" Why not ? "

" Because the goods was took away by a big van yesterday, and there's a board up in the garden, ' To let.' I'm telling no lies, sir. Go and see for yourself, if you like. I only thought I would save you the trouble, that's all."

" See here, old chap," said Mr King, looking him steadily in the eyes, " do you really believe those two women are one and the same ? "

" Believe it ! Blimy, I know it. There's no good in torking all day about it. I tell you I know it. There ! "

" All right ; don't lose your temper. There's five bob for you. I only wanted

to make sure, that was all. Good-bye," and Mr King turned on his heel and walked back to the station.

" I've been badly done," said he, " and no Barnet again for me."

When he arrived at Pump Court, a telegram was awaiting him. It simply read—

" Strange happenings here. I must see you ; but how am I to manage ?—WHITE."

CHAPTER X

WHAT had happened?" Miss White wondered. Startled by the almost vehement insistence of Miss Bruce, she had retired, without a word of reply, to her room and to bed. Sleep came but fitfully, however, to her pillow that night, and in the long intervals of waking, as she turned over in her mind the extraordinary incidents of the day, she felt that, despite her promise, she must at once fly from a house so full of mystery ere worse befell her.

At nine o'clock Parkyns brought her a cup of tea, and was at once plied with questions.

What did she know? What had she heard? Had anything dreadful occurred in the night? Parkyns merely stared for a time, and then began to ask questions in turn. What had put such strange fancies into Miss White's head, she wanted particularly to know. Nothing out of the common had happened, so far as she had heard. What made her think there had? Somebody had said that Mr Bruce had been taken ill in the night, and a doctor had been sent for. What was there extraordinary about that? It was always occurring. To be sure, Miss Bruce had a bad headache, but was it to be wondered at, robbed of half her night's rest, probably through looking after him.

Thus Parkyns. And in the face of so much palpable ignorance Miss White wisely held her peace. Miss Bruce would* feel compelled to make an explanation of some

kind, and that must determine her further course of action.

When they met, at last, in the boudoir, Miss Bruce looked very haggard and worn, and the younger woman did not fail to notice a subtle change in her attitude towards herself. It was not an unfriendly attitude, by any means, only there was a certain constraint and uneasiness in her manner that at once compelled attention. She was the first to speak. Said she—

“ I am afraid that I was very rude and abrupt to you last night. But I had been terribly upset, and scarcely knew what I was saying at the time. The truth is, my brother suddenly developed symptoms of a complete mental breakdown. He was very violent, and said things that nearly paralysed me with terror. I need not dwell upon it. You can quite understand. You will not meet him again. Precautions will

be taken against that. For a time, at least, we shall take our meals here. In the course of a few days, perhaps, we shall go to Paris together. I feel the need of your society now more than ever. My dear girl, you quite understand the situation now ? ”

“ Oh, quite,” said Miss White, with certain mental reservations. “ What a shocking thing ! He will be put under restraint, I suppose ? I should be afraid to remain here otherwise, as he has taken a great aversion to me, I am sure.”

“ No, no, not that exactly. It is fear more than anything else.”

“ But what have I done to cause him fear ? ”

“ Nothing, child, nothing. Some mad fancy of his, that is all. As I have already assured you, adequate precautions have been taken. You will not meet him again. And now, are you satisfied ? ”

"Perfectly," said Miss White, with emphasis.

Miss Bruce brightened at once.

"That is better. Ah!" she added, as a knock came at the door, "there is our breakfast. Now for cheerful faces. Excepting Simpson, the servants know nothing of what has happened. It is better that it should be so, for the present, at least."

An hour later they went out for a long drive. To Miss White the experience was a novel and exhilarating one. All the dismal forebodings of the night were put to instantaneous rout. Safe under the wing of the now self-possessed and elegant Miss Bruce, why should she trouble her little head about the strange doings of a venerable lunatic? It was Miss Bruce's affair, not hers. She looked up at the coachman and footman in livery, felt the smooth and noiseless gliding of wheels

beneath her, the soft luxuriousness of the cushions, and admitted that this was good beyond compare. Miss Bruce had uttered a single word of command, and all this luxury was instantly at her service. It was she, after all, who reigned supreme at the great house in Curzon Street—this great lady who almost begged an anonymous young lady to be her friend. What had she, Miss White, been thinking about, to indulge in dismal misgivings as to the present fitness of things? To the winds with them now, and she nestled down in the soft silken cushions, and began to dream golden dreams.

The height of beatitude was reached, however, when, later on, visits were paid to certain famous modistes, hard by New Bond Street, and wonderful confections were displayed before her wondering eyes, and she was asked in a casual way by

Miss Bruce to pick and choose from what pleased her most. Then, too, there were other visits, of no less startling a nature, to other shops of high degree, until Miss White became fairly dizzy with wonderment at it all.

At last they went to the Carlton for lunch, and there she was suddenly brought to earth again. Miss Bruce had stopped a moment at a table to speak to a couple of ladies of her acquaintance, when Miss White suddenly heard a gentleman close behind her exclaim—

“Good heavens, Tom! Look at this splendid creature, standing here. It can’t be possible, of course, for she was burned in that Paris Opéra Comique flare-up years ago. But did you ever see such a resemblance?”

“Great Scot! Yes,” came the reply. “The Bruce woman, you mean, who ran away with——”

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Miss White faced abruptly about, only to perceive two middle-aged gentlemen, with eyes now fixed intently, not upon her, but upon their respective plates.

"Come along, dear," said Miss Bruce, at this instant, and under the guidance of the *maitre d'hôtel* Miss White was quickly out of earshot of further comment. She prudently held her peace, though what she had heard caused her "furiously to think," as the French locution has it. The two gentlemen may not, after all, have referred to her. There were many other ladies in the room; but, taken in conjunction with Mr Bruce's extraordinary emotion upon seeing her the evening before, there was certainly a something in it, she felt, and that something quite enough to justify serious reflection.

However, her face gave no token of serious reflections as she babbled merrily

of nothing in particular throughout the luncheon hour. But when this ended, they drove to the neighbouring Civil Stores in the Haymarket, and while Miss Bruce was busy with her purchases there, Miss White slipped furtively away and hastily sent off to Mr King the telegram of which mention has already been made in these pages.

Let that stand as a fair indication of the thoughts then uppermost in Miss White's mind. It is unnecessary to dwell else than cursorily upon the remaining events of that, in some respects, memorable day.

They dined together in 'Miss Bruce's boudoir. Afterwards, they went to Her Majesty's Theatre. By midnight they were both in bed.

But not in Miss White's case to sleep. She found herself in a state of utter bewilderment. The day had been prolific in pleasant surprises. That, of course, was

something to give thanks for ; but these very surprises were of a nature quite inexplicable, except upon a theory she scarcely dared, as yet, to follow up, or give but a half-hearted credence to.

Yet one thing had become as clear as daylight. She was no " companion " in a mere conventional sense, to Miss Bruce. The costly gifts she had received at her hands that very afternoon utterly negatived such an absurd contention ; though it was quite characteristic of Miss White that she had accepted these costly gifts without question or any outward sign of surprise.

Still, here she found herself, in a maze of purely wild conjecture, and at last, sitting up in bed, she made a desperate effort to formulate these wild conjectures, and this was the result :—

" First," said she, " Miss Bruce takes an extraordinary amount of interest in me,

a presumable stranger, and that in itself is, I shall not say suspicious, but strange.

"Secondly, upon my first introduction to her brother, he goes off his head, as the schoolboys say, at the mere sight of me, and is now stark, staring mad. Assuredly there is something in that.

"Thirdly, when frightened out of my life, I want to leave the house, Miss Bruce almost implores me to remain with her ; and not only that, but takes me out and spends several hundred pounds on me. What, too, am I to think of that ?

"Fourthly, two strangers in a public restaurant break into ejaculations at the mere sight of me, and speak of a remarkable resemblance to a Mrs Bruce, who, it seems, ran away with somebody years ago, and perished in a fire at Paris. Who was this Mrs Bruce, and how comes it about that I bear such a resemblance to her ?

"Fifthly, and lastly, there is a mystery in this house which, perhaps, I can put my finger upon. It is now two o'clock. Everybody is in bed by this time, and the lunatic is under lock and key. So here goes."

With that Miss White leaped from her bed. A glorious full moon looked through the windows, quite unabashed at the sight of a fair young lady, in snowy nightgown, with a black mane sweeping down to her waist, and dark eyes aglow with feverish excitement. It flooded the hall and staircase with its radiance, as with bare, white feet she descended to the door of the library.

Within, the light was somewhat blurred and patchy in the stained-glass ceiling above. Still, everything in the room was clearly visible, and she made her way at once to the extraordinary bookcase which,

in her presence, had so quickly swallowed up a man.

Here was food for excitement, with a vengeance. But how was the trick accomplished? Mr Bruce had neither stooped nor reached up a hand. The case had turned, seemingly, of its own volition, as if making way for the master of the house, in accordance with domestic routine.

That was absurd, however, and Miss White, calculating the distance from the floor, ran her sensitive finger-tips over the polished mahogany, until—presto! they touched a something as fine as a hair-spring, and the beautiful mechanism was at once set in motion. The massive bookcase swung noiselessly round like a turnstile—and, through the opening, guided by a sudden flood of moonlight, she quickly glided; and, without noticing in her astonishment that the great bookcase had

swung silently back into its place again, she found herself at the head of a flight of half a dozen stone steps, leading down to a room peopled with grisly horrors. The room itself was long and lofty, with skylights of frosted glass overhead, through which the moon shone vividly. But out of nightmare she had never seen such a room as this.

A great black statue of Sekhat, the cat-goddess of the Egyptians, confronted her, with her whiskers bristling, as it seemed, and a baleful green light now gleaming from the dead eye-sockets. Ranged against the four walls were glass cases in which, elbow to elbow, stood a grisly array of mummy cases, with weird painted faces of the dead, of all sizes and colours, some hooded and cowled, some with great protruding ears, whence golden loops appeared to dangle ; green faces, faces of yellow,

purple, red, or of burnished gold. And from every face flashed such terrible eyes, their whites of enormous size, and pupils black as jet, and all focussed upon her. Looking away in terror from these, she saw a frieze running round the room, upon which were painted hideous men, with birds' heads, in brightest Venetian red ; and to escape these she darted down the steps, only to encounter greater horrors.

There she found herself among a score or more of floor-cases, filled with recumbent mummies, swathed in brown cere-clothes, so tightly bound that every outline of the dead bodies within was made visible. Some were caked black in bitumen, others covered with a frivolous network of blue beads, which only added to the horror of toe-bones and phalanges thrust through broken bandages.

Then a terror as of death suddenly seized

her, and she fled in the direction of the steps, only to be stayed by something supremely awful.

A flash of electric light had suddenly come from the farther end of the room, and, glancing in that direction, she saw, creeping towards her, an ape-like creature —a hideous, vampire man—splay-footed, with gigantic ears thrust forward, and long arms like tentacles. At sight of her, his mouth opened wide in a grin, revealing long, yellow teeth, and with a succession of inarticulate squeaks, he made straight for her.

She bounded up the steps, and made a frenzied spring at the bookcase. It was now as solid as a rock. She pounded upon it in vain. And then she realized that she was a prisoner, and alone with this monster. She leaped to the floor again, just evading the clutches of a pair of vulture-like claws,

and then came a race for life or death in that accursed place. She flew from case to case, doubling back, and on again ; round and round the room, as elusive to his grasp as a thing of light. Thus, for many minutes, until her strength failed, and the foul thing clutched her by the throat at last.

Then—ere his talons could press the bright young life out of her—she heard a yell, as from one possessed, saw a weird, white figure spring down the steps, and fall upon the mis-shapen monster, whose grip at her throat at once relaxed.

“ Is not once enough, you devil ? ” he shrieked.

The voice was Mr Bruce’s, and she fled for her life again, up the steps. The book-case had nearly closed, but, thrusting her arm through the aperture, she stayed its further progress. She turned and looked back for

a single instant, and saw the two in death-grips upon the floor.

Then, as the bookcase clicked into its place again, she staggered through the library, up the broad staircase, and, leaping into bed, covered up her head, nearly mad with terror.

CHAPTER XI

MR KING read over Miss White's telegram a second time.

"More strange happenings," said he. "Well, this must be looked into at once, and, as for managing an interview, I will save her further trouble by visiting Curzon Street myself to-morrow. Pretexts are always at the end of one's tongue. And there is the chance, too, of meeting Miss Bruce. After two such sharp encounters with Miss Gibson I now feel quite capable of meeting Miss Bruce on something like equal terms. Who knows what may come of it. I wonder, too, if these 'strange

happenings' have any bearing upon the Featherstone affair? Ah, well; we shall see." And his thoughts drifted straight-way into another channel.

On arriving at his chambers the following morning he found awaiting him such of the personal belongings of Mr Felix Featherstone as had been left at the Langham Hotel. Possessing *carte blanche* to deal with these as he thought fit, he proceeded with quiet deliberation to break open the locks, one by one, of the various packages, and carefully examined their contents. In the larger boxes he found nothing but clothes, of infinite variety, but throwing no light whatever upon the question in hand.

In a small Gladstone bag, however, full of odds and ends, he came upon something that made him "sit up" with amazement. This was nothing less than a cabinet

portrait of Miss White. He rubbed his eyes, and looked at it again. The costume was of another day, and reminiscent of the late eighties, but the face might have been photographed a week before, and the sitter none other than Miss White, of Curzon Street. He turned it over, and read on the back in a handwriting now quite familiar to him—

“An iceberg.”

This was startling, indeed. For seventeen years this portrait had not seen the light of day. It was impossible to jump to but one conclusion, which the acute legal mind at once formulated in this wise:—

“This portrait, labelled ‘An Iceberg’, I find among Mr Featherstone’s effects.

“In a letter written by him to Mr Blake seventeen years ago, he speaks of a lady whom ‘he greatly admires as having ‘a certain amount of ice in her moral texture.’

"That lady was Mrs Bruce, of Curzon Street, and the portrait would readily pass for that of Miss White, now of the same address. •

"The conclusion being, that there is in reality no Miss White, but a second and younger Miss Bruce, who is in blissful unconsciousness of this stupendous fact. Whew ! It is a staggerer."

It was such a "staggerer" indeed, that, suspending his quest, he remained for several moments in deep reflection.

What use, for instance, should he make of this knowledge, revealed to him as by a miracle ? Obviously, it were better to keep it to himself for the present. This from a personal, mayhap selfish, point of view, for he had looked upon Miss White, the lady companion, and found her fair, and engrossingly attractive. Miss Bruce, the heiress to a vast property, however, was

in quite a different category of girls. Still, he had jumped to a very good conclusion. Assuming his contention to be correct in one sense—was she more than her mother's child—was she legally an heiress after all ? Why had she been brought up with absolutely no knowledge of her antecedents ? There had been a great deal of method in this ; and upon the part of whom ? Had the eccentric Mr Bruce taken any part at all in this ? It was conceivable that in the case of a dishonoured home he should wish to meet with no reminder of blighted domestic joys. Yes, that was very conceivable, but then, why should she have been suddenly restored to her home in the guise of “ a companion ” ? That seemed inexplicable.

Indeed, the whole business was so extraordinary that, to him, in the end, it seemed an act of prudence to “ lie low ” for a time and await developments — developments

which, reading between the lines of her telegram, had probably already begun. It was something, indeed, it was a great deal that he chanced to know what he knew, and could afford to lie low for a season. Yes, that would be, by far, the better policy, and with the heightened colour and quickened respiration of mental excitement, he resumed his quest.

He soon found another photograph—that of an exceedingly handsome young man, of a distinctly Transatlantic type, and seemingly about thirty years of age. Instinctively Mr King turned this over, and found written on the back in the same handwriting, simply this—

“A d——d fool.”

“This is prodigious,” said he, at the same time making a mental note that the portrait had been taken by Russell & Son, Baker Street. He placed the two pictures in his

coat pocket, and continued his search. There were a number of letters ; among them several from Mr Blake bearing the Boston post-mark. There were also a dozen or more received bills, and at last a dainty little note. This was the greatest *trouvaille* of all.

It was dated from 99, Curzon Street, May 21st, 1887.

" Dear Felix," it said, " in a weak moment I am yielding to your persistence. You may come to-morrow evening, but upon one condition—an inexorable one—it must be the last time. B. has been very strange in his manner during the past few days, and I am afraid that he knows of these visits, so they really must end. You know what a dislike he took to you at Cairo, and goodness knows what construction he may put upon your coming here so often. You

must go your ways, Felix, and I must bear my cross. There is no help for it. So, be very good and circumspect when you call. It might have been once ; it never can be now. Let me continue to admire and respect my good friend, Felix, at a distance. There is no help for it—none—none.—Yours in sorrow,

ELEANOR."

"H'm," said Mr King, "I must think this out," and, lighting a cigarette, he paced the floor in deep reflection for a time.

"It is plain enough," said he at last, "that the melting mood had set in with great severity when this letter was written. There was little of the iceberg left. Still, it is not the letter of an erring woman, but rather of one who, finding herself upon the brink of the abyss, recoils from the fatal plunge. She was conscious of her weakness ; frankly admits it, and appeals to the

man's sense of honour to protect her from herself.

" Precisely ; but is it not, at the same time, just the sort of letter to further inflame a man, who, finding the last barrier to be a flimsy thing of ethics, would throw all consideration of prudence and every qualm of conscience to the winds, determined only to beat down the last lingering show of resistance ? How long could the wavering scruples of a woman withstand the impassioned appeals of a lover in such a militant mood ? Fifteen minutes ? Half an hour, perhaps ; and then——. Dash it ! it is but human nature after all. It is as plain as a pikestaff. The young gallant came, he saw, and conquered ; and the twain bolted the same night. Bolted only to meet their doom in Paris ? Well, the acts, so far as I know them, certainly appear to point in that direction. Still,

I have not been to Paris yet~~to~~ make inquiries, and my visit there may lead to surprises. Who knows? And now for Curzon Street."

A swift hansom bowled him thither in less than no time. He dismissed the cab, tripped up the steps, and rang the bell. Almost immediately the door was opened by a footman. He seemed almost preternaturally grave.

"I have called," said Mr King, "to see Miss White. She resides here, I believe?"

"Miss White! Oh yes, sir. But she is ill, and—?"

"Ill?"

"Yes, sir; ill in bed. Will you leave your card, sir?"

This was somewhat disconcerting. Still, Mr King was in a defiant mood.

"Well—er—yes, certainly," and he fumbled for his card-case; "but Miss

Bruce will do as well. Will you be good enough——”

“ Miss Bruce is not at home to anybody to-day, sir.”

“ Oh, indeed ! ” Perhaps, though, if you were to take this card,” and he produced it, “ she might—er——” .

“ No use, sir. My orders are very positive.”

“ The deuce ; oh, very well, then. Send the card up to Miss White instead, and say that I will call another day.”

“ Yes, sir.”

The door closed, and Mr King slowly descended the steps, a much-perplexed man.

“ A dashed funny business, this,” said he. “ The White girl ill ; and Miss Bruce refuses to see anyone ! What the—— Well, ‘I’m—— Hang it all ; this is a facer ! ”

Somewhat crestfallen, he turned his footsteps again in the direction of Piccadilly, and, for a time, strolled about quite aimlessly. What on earth had happened at 99, Curzon Street that he should be denied admittance in this curt fashion, he reflected. Miss White ill in bed? A fine, healthy girl like that? Bosh! It was a case of pure funk on the part of Miss Bruce. There you had it! Mr Percy King was a dangerous man, to be kept at a distance. Oh yes, of course, he had made a mistake at Barnet. Admitted. He had quite given himself away at the outset. As opposed to Miss Bruce he had not a card to play with. Never mind, a new deal was imminent; and then let Miss Bruce look to her hand, and see how many trumps she could count upon.

"Oh yes," he added, in conclusion, "it is fair sport. She is a 'game 'un.' But

we must fight it out to a finish. She scores to-day, but to-morrow——” and he stopped and lighted a cigarette. “Yes—well, we shall see what turns up to-morrow. And now, I wonder if Blake is in. I must have this photograph of ‘A d—d fool’ identified as that of Felix Featherstone. Hi! Cabby!”

A hansom instantly pulled up at the kerb.

“Drive me,” said he, “to the Hotel Cecil.”

In the vestibule he ran across Tommy Toshington.

“Mr Blake anywhere about?” asked Mr King.

“No. Gone to Brighton—Metropole—for a day or two. Easily found if you want him. But, I say, you’ve heard about it, I suppose. A bit rum, isn’t it?”

“What is rum?”

“Why, haven’t you seen the *Pall Mall*? ”

“Certainly not.”

"Then get it. It will interest you, and Blake too, perhaps."

"Don't be so confoundedly mysterious. What do you mean?"

"Come outside, buy a *Pall Mall*, and read for yourself."

They went outside. Tommy Toshington at once secured a copy of the paper in question, turned over a page or two, and pointed to a paragraph midway down the column.

"There you are! Old Bruce—Curzon Street. Found dead—suspicious circumstances. Was he murdered or not? All that sort of thing. There you are."

A ray of illumination suddenly sped through Mr King's brain. He grasped the paper, and with avidity read a brief paragraph to the effect that Mr John Bruce, the well-known Egyptologist, had been found dead in his private museum, in

Curzon Street, under circumstances which led to a suspicion of foul play. That was all.

“ H’m ! ” said Mr King. “ Now I begin to understand things. Dash it all ! I was wrong in my surmises, after all.”

CHAPTER XII

“ TELL you what, Tommy T.,” said Mr King, after a few moments’ serious cogitation, “ your friend Blake is away. You are now killing time in London, instead of grizzly bears and things in the Rockies. What do you say to a day or two with me in Paris ? ” .

“ The king’s wish to me is always a command,” said Tommy T., bowing low. “ I’ll just pack up a tooth-brush, a night-shirt, and a collar or two, and then for Gay Paree with all my heart.”

“ Don’t run away, Master Tommy; with the idea that I am on pleasure bent. I have

made one or two curious discoveries to-day ; and, if it be true that old Bruce has really shuffled off his mortal thing-em-bob, then the sooner I bring this inquiry to a head the better. I am as sure as I am of anything in this world that Mr Felix Featherstone and Mrs Bruce bolted together from 99, Curzon Street, on the night of the 22nd of May, 1887, but whether they went to Paris or not, I am at present unable to say. That is yet to be proved, and is just what is now taking me there."

"But have you any definite clue ? "

asked Tommy T., in an altered tone.

"Only this ; " and Mr King whipped out Mrs Bruce's portrait from his pocket.

" You used to be a fairly hot-blooded youth, Tommy. Would you have bolted, other methods failing, with a woman like this ? "

"Would I ? Like a shot. Jove ! is that the woman ? "

"It is."

"What a ripper! Fancy a lovely creature like that being burnt to death! How on earth did you get hold of the photo?"

"A professional secret, Mr Toshington. And now look upon this"—and he showed him the portrait of the man—"what is your private opinion of that gallard?"

"Opinion! Why, that he is a deuced handsome fellow. Is he the chap?"

Mr King nodded.

"The proprietor of a small hotel ought to remember those two faces, I take it," said he.

"Bless my soul, yes. You are a lucky beggar, Rex."

"Why?"

"To get things by the handle so quickly. I wish Blake were here."

"So don't I. I hope he will remain at Brighton until I have quite finished with

this job. By the way, come up with me to Baker Street."

"What for?"

"I want to satisfy myself on a certain point."

"What has Baker Street got to do with it?"

"Everything. Don't argue. Jump into this hansom."

"But I'm peckish. Can't we have luncheon first?"

"No, sir. Jump in, I tell you."

They drove to Russell & Sons, the Baker Street photographers, where Mr King produced the man's portrait, and asked for particulars. Search through the books merely confirmed a conviction. The portrait was indubitably that of a Mr Felix Featherstone, residing at the time it was taken at the Langham Hotel.

Armed with this incontrovertible evi-

dence, Mr King now lent a kindly ear to Mr Toshington's renewed suggestion. Whereupon they lunched both wisely and well, but not at the Cecil. This done, Mr King returned to the Middle Temple, where he spent a busy afternoon, and just before nine o'clock the twain met again at Charing Cross Station. A few minutes later they were on their way to Paris.

It was piping hot when they arrived at the Gare du Nord on the following morning.

"Where shall we stop?" asked Mr Toshington. "At the Grand?"

"Certainly not," said Mr King, hailing a cab. "Cocher, drive to the Hôtel du Prince Albert, Rue St Hyacinthe."

The cabby reflected a moment.

"*Bon,*" said he. He flicked his whip, and off they went down the interminable Rue Lafayette.

A man might spend a lifetime in Paris

without knowing the whereabouts of the Rue St Hyacinthe. Yet it is within pistol shot of the Tuileries Gardens ; a short, narrow street hard by St. Roche. There are worse hostellries, too, in Paris than the little "Prince Albert," though Mr Toshington began to sniff at sight of it.

"Is it really necessary to stay here?" he asked.

"Yes. That is just what I came to Paris for. What else? you simpleton! Jump out," he added, as the cab pulled up at the entrance with a jerk.

Early as it was, a large double-bedded room was at once at their service.

"What I propose," said Mr King, "is an immediate 'wash-up,' then coffee, and afterwards a stroll in whatever direction you will. Later in the day, I shall make inquiries. But eighteen years is a deuce of a long time, and what will come of the

inquiries, goodness only knows, though the hotel books must reveal something."

An hour later, after ordering dinner at six, they were out upon the boulevards. They strolled down to the Place Boieldieu and surveyed the new Opéra Comique, but to little purpose. Beyond hearsay, Mr. King knew little or nothing of the hideous tragedy of 1887. Mr Toshington knew still less, and was frankly bored.

"No good messing about here," said he. "These stones, even if they could speak, were in their native quarry when the thing happened. Come on."

They returned at once to the boulevards.

"Tiresome work, killing time," remarked Mr King, after an interval of silence. "I know a man named Paul Becque on the staff of the *Figaro*. He could give me a few points—but look at the

time. Its so confoundedly early. If I only knew his private address."

"Why not inquire?" suggested Mr Toshington.

"Where?"

"Why, at the *Figaro* office, where else? I know the place." And he stopped and looked about him. There it is—just opposite."

"Good idea, Tommy," said Mr King, and, crossing the road, they were about to enter when Mr King found himself slapped heartily on the back, and quickly turning, found himself face to face with M. Paul Becque himself.

"Well, I'm — ; the very man I was looking for," said he.

"Good. Delighted to see you, old fellow. Come inside."

The two shook hands most cordially. Mr Toshington was introduced, and the

trio at once repaired to M. Becque's private room. After a suitable interval, Mr King mentioned the object of his visit.

"Oh ! certainly," said M. Becque. "I can tell you all about that." And he at once rang and ordered a file of the *Figaro* for 1887 to be brought into the room. "Ah ! *mon Dieu* !" he continued, "I have cause to remember it, as if it were but yesterday. I was dining with a friend at the Café Anglais, just on the corner of the Rue Marivaux, at the time. It was quite early in the evening. 'Mignon' was the opera. The first act had barely begun when some scenery flared up, and began to drop, blazing, upon the stage. Then came a panic. The iron curtain refused to work, the corridors became congested with men and women fighting for their lives. Oh yes, the usual thing. It was terrible. We rushed out into the street,

and saw people at the upper windows—on the roof even—people shrieking and wringing their hands, and— Ah! I'd rather not recall the awful sight. There is the file.” And turning over the pages rapidly for a moment, he added, “ I will just give you the bald facts. It was on May 25th, a Wednesday, number of victims eighty.”

“ All recognised ? ” asked Mr King, eagerly.

“ Nearly so. I will tell you in a moment.” And M. Becque glanced through succeeding numbers of the journal. “ Yes,” said he, “ with the exception of about half a dozen.”

“ Were there any English among the victims ? ”

“ Yes—five or six.”

“ Recognised ? ”

“ Every one—yes.”

"H'm!"

M. Becque seemed surprised.

"Why h'm?" said he.

Mr King at once explained.

"*Tiens!* Quite a romance! But what I meant to say merely was that among the identified dead there were five or six English people, that was all."

"Oh, I see," said Mr King. "There may have been others. Just so. Among the unidentified victims was there a woman?"

M. Becque again referred to the newspaper file.

"Three," said he.

"Ah! then, there is still a possibility."

"Without doubt, a strong possibility, if your facts are correct. I wish I could assist you further. The officials at the Morgue might be of some service. They have photographs, of course, jewellery,

and a lot of little things like that, which often lead to identification. But if this runaway couple were traced to the Hôtel du Prince Albert, why go farther? Were no inquiries made at the time?"

"Yes, oh yes," said Mr King.

"With what result?"

"That they both had perished in the fire."

"Then, pardon me, why, at this late day, do you reopen the question? To what purpose? Frankly, you amaze me."

Again Mr King explained.

M. Becque listened and shook his head. "Better accept it as a foregone conclusion," said he. "You are merely wasting your time, dear friend. Eighteen years! *Peste!* Give it up. One hundred thousand pounds is a lot of money, I know, but surely there must be a report of the investigation in existence somewhere. That ought to satisfy

the American authorities. Go back to London, and pursue your inquiries there. Paris is not the place at all."

Mr King was silent for a moment. Then said he—

"Yes; there a good deal of truth in what you say. But I want to satisfy myself on one or two points now that I have taken the matter up. Would you mind giving me a note to the people at the Morgue?"

"To the greffier? Certainly; I would, with pleasure, go with you myself, but, unfortunately, I am leaving for Orleans this morning—big official function—must be there—awfully sorry—would have been delighted to spend a few hours with you and your friend."

Meanwhile he had been scribbling a note.

"There you are. You will find the

greffier a very decent sort of fellow. I hope you will have some luck, but I greatly doubt it."

A few minutes later Mr King and his friend were swiftly faring in the direction of the Morgue. What happened there was briefly this. The greffier was courtesy itself. He produced photographs, duly numbered, of the victims already mentioned, and gruesome enough objects, too, they proved to be. Comparison with the portraits Mr King had brought with him was absolutely barren of result, however. Then he was stupefied, as, after placing the others aside, he held up a single photograph. It was the charred corpse of—something.

"It is a man," said the greffier. "The only body that was not finally identified."

"Any English among them?"

"No, monsieur; two Germans, man

and wife ; two Frenchwomen from Toulouse, and an Italian.”

Mr King thanked the polite official upon leaving.

“ Well, Tommy,” said he, “ I’m dashed if I understand this.”

“ It is a fair knockdown, and no mistake,” said Tommy. “ Let us drive to the nearest café. I want to wash the taste of that beastly hole out of my mouth. Faugh ! ”

.

A patriarchal garçon, with stooping shoulders, an insinuating manner, and one upper tooth, waited upon them at dinner that night at the Hôtel du Prince Albert.

“ Been long here ? ” asked Mr King, casually.

“ Yais, sare. Twainty-fife year.”

“ Must have met a jolly lot of people during that time.”

"Yais, oh, yais! Plainty Ainglish."

"I suppose so. Were you here when the Opéra Comique was burned."

"Oh, yais. Two people from London that stop here, suppose burned. Go out to Opéra Comique, nevaire come back to pay bill; nozzing more heard."

"What nonsense, Jean," said a voice at his elbow.

Mr King looked up. It was the proprietor of the hotel who had spoken.

"If it is of any interest to you, sir," he continued. "A German couple, returning from London, came here on the morning of the fire, went to the Opéra Comique after dinner, and never returned. A very sad business, sir. Their bodies were identified at the Morgue about ten days later by relatives from Munich, who paid my account, and removed the luggage."

Mr King suddenly whipped out the two photographs from his pocket.

"That was not the couple, I suppose?"

"Oh, dear no," said the landlord, after the merest glance at the pictures, "not the slightest resemblance. It isn't likely I shall ever forget their faces."

Mr King's jaw fell.

"Tommy," he whispered. "An awful idea has just come into my head."

"What is that?"

"Never mind. It is my own idea at present, and it will keep."

CHAPTER XIII

You may have remarked that, hitherto, Mr King had displayed—so far as the course of this narrative is concerned—no very remarkable gift for solving mysteries. To tell the truth, however, the question of Miss White's parentage—to her so absorbing—never interested him in the least. He had found Miss White simply adorable. What did the rest matter? So that the rebuffs he had received at the hands of Miss Gibson were due to the mere perfunctory performance of a promise he had made to the younger lady.

So that when engaged upon a totally

different inquiry, he had alighted upon the discovery that Miss White was unquestionably not Miss White, but the daughter and sole heiress of a very rich man, it came as an unwelcome surprise.

As for Mr Blake's statements, he had accepted them as being substantially correct, and the sole object of his visit to Paris was to put the corroboration he expected to find ready at hand into such legal form as might suffice for Mr Blake's needs.

Now he was confronted by a new and startling problem. He had been officially informed that no persons answering to the runaways' description had perished in the Paris fire. He further learned that no such couple had been staying at the Hôtel du Prince Albert on that date. There was no proof that the pair had been in Paris at all.

On the other hand—it was true beyond any doubt or peradventure—that Mr Felix

Featherstone, at the invitation of Mrs Bruce, visited her at 99, Curzon Street, on the evening of Sunday, the 22nd of May, 1887, since which time neither had been seen either dead or alive.

Hence, as I say, a new and startling problem, complicated, perhaps, by the death of Mr Bruce, had suddenly arisen—a problem the solution of which promised to test Mr King's abilities to their extremest capacity. This was just the stimulus to action he needed, and he was fired with the possibilities of a brilliant success.

“Tell you what, Tommy,” said he, over his demi-tasse, “I am going to chuck the whole business for to-night. We shall return to London in the morning, and then to it, hammer and tongs. But a little round of sane and decorous amusement to-night will do neither of us any harm, eh ? ”

“I know it won't injure me very much,”

said Mr Toshington. "I feel like having a deuce of a fling. Of all the darned nasty, depressing days, and in Paris, too."

"Quite true, Tommy. It's all my fault, I know."

"That beastly Morgue, and pictures of dead bodies burned to a cinder, and——"

"Yes, yes. Drop it, for goodness' sake. There, have a cigar. What do you say to half an hour at the Café de la Paix, and then the Red Mill, or Montmartre."

"We'll sample both," said Tommy T., with sublime impartiality, as he lighted his cigar. "Anything to cure the 'jumps.' I've had 'em bad all day."

"Very well, then; come along."

They spent a very enjoyable and rational evening together. From start to finish the Featherstone affair was never once mentioned.

The next day they returned to London,

and then Mr King set to work in dead earnest to get to the heart of the mystery. It was slow work at first. Obviously, with a dead man lying unburied in the house, he could not for the present repeat his visit to 99, Curzon Street. As for Miss White, her silence was, under the circumstances, quite explicable.

What surprised him, however, in view of the reference to "foul play" in the *Pall Mall* paragraph, was that, beyond an inch or so of obituary notice in the *Times*, no further mention of Mr Bruce's death had been made in the Press. Indeed, that set him a-thinking, with the result that on the second evening after his return he ventured on a curious experiment. It was raining in torrents—a lucky circumstance—for, dressed in a shabby waterproof, with a tweed cap well pulled over his eyes, and a briarwood pipe in his mouth,

he made his way into a private bar of "The George" in the mews backing upon Curzon Street. Nobody took any notice of him, so he ordered "half a pint of six," and seated himself upon a wooden bench behind a long deal table, and leisurely re-filled his pipe.

"And when is the funeral at 99 to be, George?" said a frowsy-looking man beside him.

"Friday, two o'clock, at 'Ighgate," said his companion, a little man in rusty black.

"I never seen him meself, but they tell me he was a rum sort of old beggar."

"So I 'eard, too ; a bit balmy, from all accounts."

"Appleplexy, wasn't it ?"

"So I 'eard, and it ain't for me to say no to it. But it's just like this here, William. I helps to lay him out, and to myself I says, says I, I've seen 'em wot

have died of all sorts of diseases, but if this be appleplexy, Lord keep me from it! His face was that swollen, and he'd clawed his neck something awful."

"Sort of choked like, I suppose?"

"That's it—no other word for it, William—choked. That's the remark I made to meself at the time. He looks as if he'd been choked, I says."

"He couldn't a-been, I suppose, George?"

The little man in rusty black faced about quickly.

"Wot jer mean, William? It was appleplexy wot killed him. I told yer so. Another 'arf pint with me, 'William, and the'll I'm orf."

Mr King made a mental note of this curious conversation, knocked the ashes out of his pipe, finished his tankard, and slouched out into the rain again.

Here, to his thinking, was fairly reason-

able evidence from a source beyond suspicion, that Mr Bruce had died a violent death ; and thus the hint in the *Pall Mall Gazette* seemed amply justified. And yet the funeral was fixed for Friday. Obviously no official inquiries had been made, or were about to be made—and for what reason ?

Number 99, Curzon Street, was, indeed, a house of mystery, in which “strange happenings,” as Miss White had succinctly put it, could be hushed up in a way that, to the legal mind, seemed wholly extraordinary, and inexplicable. Hence this strangely sudden illness of Miss White began to alarm him. A few days before she had been in the pink of condition. How came it about that within a comparatively few hours of her sending him such an urgent telegram he had been denied admittance on the plea that she was now

seriously ill in bed, and unable to receive him. That Miss Bruce was "not at home" to casual callers was comprehensible enough, under the circumstances. But why, unless actively involved in what now began to assume the guise of a tragedy, should Miss White suddenly become inaccessible?

"Things wear an ugly look," he repeated to himself a dozen times, as he strode down Piccadilly, regardless of the pelting rain. Was she in need of his assistance, he wondered; and the idea tormented him sorely. For how was it possible for him, under any pretext soever, to obtain admission to that grim house in Curzon Street? He could not intrude upon what might or might not be Miss Bruce's private grief. Death interdicted him upon the threshold, and he must needs wait with such patience as in him lay until after the funeral before making any further move.

He suddenly looked up and took his bearings. He had arrived at the Circus, he found, and after a moment's hesitation he crossed over in the direction of the Pavilion, and was hurrying on towards Leicester Square when he heard a shrill voice calling after him—

“Hi ! Rex, Rex, old man ! ”

He turned and saw Tommy Toshington come panting up.

“Saw you across the road and shouted, but a lot of beastly cabs got in the way ; afraid at first I had missed you. Whew ! all out of breath, old man. Blake is in town and in a deuce of a state, after what I told him about our visit to Paris. Wants to see you at once—been down to your place twice. By the way, you seem to be in great demand to-night. Other people wanting to see you, too. Porter at the Temple gate—hearty old cock—has got some important

message for you. But you'd better see Blake first. I expect he's waiting at the Cecil on the chance of your turning up." Here Mr Toshington came to a full stop.

"Nothing else, Tommy?" .

"No. I've got the whole lot off my chest. Shall we take a cab? No, you are too wet; you would drown me out. Where the deuce have you been with that dashed solemn mug of yours? Come on. It is not raining now. We can do it in ten minutes." And he linked his arm in Mr King's, and the pair crossed the square in the direction of Green Street.

"What did you say to Mr Blake that he is so upset?" asked Mr King, after a suitable interval for reflection.

"What did I say to him? Why, I told him everything that happened in Paris, of course."

“ Very good of you, I am sure. When I undertake another inquiry, I'll go alone.”

“ Why, dash it all ! You don't mean to say ‘that—’”

“ Your tongue runs away with your discretion ? Yes ; it always did, and always will. I've half a mind to throw up the job.”

“ Oh, Lord ! don't do that ! I'm so sorry —I really didn't mean—”

“ No ; you sort of chaps never do mean to do anything out of the way. Why the devil couldn't you have held your peace ? Why tell him at all that you had been to Paris with me ? ”

Mr Toshington by this time was quite chapfallen.

“ Look here, old Rex,” said he ; “ you mustn't sit down on me like that, you know. It makes me feel bad, it hurts—upon my word, it does.”

Mr King laughed.

"Don't take it too much to heart, Tommy," said he. "You will learn a thing or two some of these days. I'm not cross, exactly, but like to manage things my own way. I hope to goodness Blake is not waiting for me. I don't care particularly to meet him to-night. I'm a bit worried and upset. Did the porter at the Temple say what he wanted to see me about ? "

"No ; but I imagine it was something very important."

"Oh, well ! here we are at the Cecil. If Blake is out I shall not wait."

Mr Blake was out. So Mr King shook hands with his friend Toshington, called a hansom, and drove straightway to the Temple.

"Well, Johnston," he said to the porter at the gate ; "I hear you have some message for me."

Mr. "A young lady has been here,
dreadful way."

his heart began to thump against

still "White?" he asked.

"Sir, that's the name she gave me.
said you would know. Quite a young
, sir. She said the business was most
ortant, and you were to come at once
er at the hotel just opposite the British
eum, where she is stopping for a day
two, sir."

in a ~~cheart~~,
r King thing
ribs. cross,
Miss Wy own
Yes, sic not

CHAPTER XIV

As she lay huddled under the bed-clot quaking with fear, on that terrible night Miss White felt that she had succeeded in putting her hands upon a mystery of direst description; and she then and there resolved that, God willing, she would escape from the accursed house tomorrow.

For sleep was impossible. Everyed within her was "jumping." She was a woman distraught. It was soon to be sure, that when her first paroxysm of terror had passed she could see through the medium of the moonlight, the two locks

doors, and knew that nothing could enter her room unperceived. So with tense and strained eyeballs, she watched and waited for the possible coming of she scarcely knew what.

She was conscious, too, of a continual choking sensation in her throat. Her neck felt bruised and sore to the touch. Again and again in her excited fancy she saw that grisly shape leaping with outstretched talons upon her, and she turned icy cold at the thought that, but for the miraculous coming of Mr Bruce, all earthly things for her would have been at an end for ever.

The cold, grey, reassuring dawn came at last, and with it a sense of security that caused her to close her eyes with a feeling of grateful relief. The tremendous tension of the night slowly relaxed, and at last she slept.

At nine she was awakened by the coming

of Parkyns, who brought her a cup of tea. The girl was greatly agitated.

"Oh, Miss White," said she, "I'm nearly frightened out of my blessed life. Please don't say anything to Miss Bruce, but I'm going to pack my box, and out of this house I go, wages or no wages. Stand it no longer I really couldn't. No—not for a hundred pounds I couldn't."

Miss White was at once alert for information.

"Why, Parkyns? What has happened now?"

"Oh! it's the master again. But he is dead this time. Ain't it awful?"

"Mr Bruce dead!" gasped Miss White, at once gripping the situation.

"So they tell me, miss. Got out of his room in the night, and was found dead somewhere in the house—I don't justly know where—nobody knows but Simpson.

It's always Simpson what knows, and he looks like a corpse himself this morning. It's my belief—goodness gracious, miss, whatever is the matter with your neck ? ”

For a moment Miss White had forgotten, and was annoyed with herself.

“ Nothing, Parkyns. What do you mean ? ” she replied.

“ Why, it's all black spots, as if you'd dipped your fingers in ink, and then made a spring at your own throat, like. And your neck is that swelled up ! Oh, my ! whatever is it ? 'Ere ! let me bring you a 'and-glass, and see for yourself ? ”

What should she say ? What course pursue under circumstances such as these ? Her mental processes were rapid, however, and when Parkyns held up the glass, and she saw in it what turned her sick and cold, black and purple stains upon her fair

white neck, with cords and tissues swollen and red, she gave a start of horror.

“ Oh, Parkyns ! You must keep this from Miss Bruce. You must not let her see me. You must help me to escape from the house. Oh, dear ! what a misfortune ! ”

Parkyns gazed at her, open-mouthed with astonishment.

“ Why—whatever is it, miss ? ”

“ Don’t ask me, Parkyns. I couldn’t—I daren’t—tell you. There is a lace scarf in the drawer yonder. Give me that ? ”

Parkyns obeyed, still full of wonder.

“ Wrap it round my neck, so as to hide every sign of discolouration. That’s it ! Be sure that not a mark shows. Give me the glass. Capital ! I have merely a sore throat, now, Parkyns, you understand ? ”

“ Quite right, miss. I twig.”

“ And you will tell Miss Bruce, if she inquires after me, that I am not at all

well, and don't wish to be disturbed? On no account let her know that I have heard of Mr Bruce's death. I have my reasons for that, Parkyns. I shall get up at once and dress, and when the coast is quite clear; and you think I can slip away without being observed, come and let me know. The quicker the better. You will do this for me, won't you, Parkyns?"

"Indeed I will, miss." And as the door closed softly behind her, Miss White sprang from her bed, and turned the key in the lock. Then she paused for one instant, irresolute.

"Am I doing the right thing?" she asked herself. "Is there a better way? Is there any other way? No, no. My instincts tell me that I can trust him, above all others. He is good, he is honest, he is clever, and—he likes me. I'll go straight to the Temple, and tell him everything."

With that she dressed hastily and completely, even to her hat. A re-adjustment of the lace about her throat, together with the aid of a feather boa, rendered her hateful secret quite secure from prying eyes. She looked at herself in the glass. Her face was somewhat haggard and drawn, but in other respects she was presentable enough. Then she filled a small hand-bag with what might prove useful in her flight, and awaited the return of Parkyns.

It seemed an unconscionable time of waiting, but a tap came at the door at last, and Parkyns entered.

"It's all right, miss. Lor' ! you have dressed quickly. I told Miss Bruce what you said (and she do look shocking ill and bad, indeed she do). 'I'm sorry Miss White is ill,' she says, 'but it's just as well she don't know the awful news just yet ; it would only upset her, poor girl. So let her keep

quiet, and don't disturb her, Parkyns, on no account, don't.' All very kind and nice she put it. But now she has gone upstairs to the master's room, and the doctor is there, and Simpson, and there isn't a soul about, and you can slip away beautiful."

Miss White thanked the honest girl with effusion, and within the next two minutes the door of 99, Curzon Street, had closed behind her.

She drove at once to the Middle Temple, and learned that Mr King was out, and would not return until late in the afternoon. This was disappointment number one. She left her name, and said she would call again at six.

Then for seven mortal hours she killed time, after a melancholy fashion, wondering meanwhile if Mr King had received her telegram of the day before. Punctually at six she returned to Pump Court, where

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a fairly penitent office-boy ruefully confessed that he had forgotten to deliver her message, and that Mr King had now gone to Paris on business for a day or two.

"A day or two!"

Here was an awkward and wholly unlooked-for situation. How was it to be faced? What was she to do in the interval of waiting? The thought of returning to Curzon Street was intolerable. There, to be sure, was her old home at Finchley, and an assured welcome at the end of the journey. But she shrank from the explanations she must needs make in that quarter. It was a cruel dilemma. Shelter for the night she must obtain somewhere—but where? Hotels there were on every hand, and in her purse were several gold pieces. But she was conscious of possessing but a small hand-bag in the shape of luggage, and, after all, she was only a girl

of nineteen, though quite old and acute enough to have learned that the world is suspicious, as well as censorious.

While she was ruminating upon these unpleasant facts on her way out of the Temple, she suddenly espied a ruddy and benevolent-looking man standing in the open door of the porter's lodge. She stepped up to him at once. This was her impulsive way of doing things.

" You know Mr Percy King, of course ? "

said she.

" Why, yes, of course," said he.

" Well, I am just in this predicament," she pursued; " I have come up to town to see him on particular business, and find that he has gone to Paris for a day or two. I would prefer to remain in town until he returns. But I am a stranger here, and do not know where to go. I am afraid of the big hotels, and should like to know of some

quiet place where ladies are received without question. As you know Mr King, and look like a good-natured man, perhaps you might assist me to find what I want."

The porter was pleased and flattered. Moreover, the lady was young and passing fair.

"Why, certainly, miss," said he. "Lor' bless you, yes. Now let me think a minute." And he stroked his cheek reflectively for a time. Then he counted his fingers slowly, one by one, shaking his head at each until he came to his right-hand thumb, when he brightened.

"I've got it, miss; a place where lots of American ladies go, I'm told. Just opposite the British 'Museum.'" And he mentioned the name.

"An hotel, 'then ?'"

"Yes, miss, one of the temperance ones. You don't mind that, I dare say."

She smiled, and rewarded his courtesy by a coin of the realm. Within a quarter of an hour she was comfortably installed in a cosy room overlooking the great Museum. She had been careful to explain that her visit to London was of a legal nature, and that she had been recommended to the present house by a high official of the Middle Temple. If this was not quite ingenuous, it at least procured for her instant welcome and consideration.

She dined perfunctorily, and retired early. She slept fairly well.

The next day she spent mostly in the British Museum, and, strange to say, despite her recent experience, the weird contents of the mummy rooms held her in a sort of thrall. She paid but one visit to the Middle Temple.

At ten o'clock the following morning she read at his chambers a telegram from

Mr King, saying that he was *en route* for London. Nothing more ; no date of arrival specified. Miss White was on tenterhooks the livelong day. One would have thought him to be the dearest one on earth to her, such was her impatience for his coming. The porter in the lodge became almost fatherly in the interest he took in the matter. He had begun to have an idea or two. Probably Mr King would not be at all displeased at what he had done for the young lady. That was something well worth taking into consideration, perhaps.

The hours passed on. Night closed in. Heavy rain began to fall. Miss White became very miserable and dejected. She had abandoned all hope of seeing him until the morrow, when a tap came at the door, and the message came.

“ Mr King is waiting to see you in the reception room, miss.”

All her native dignity disappeared. She bounded down the stairs, almost in a hysterical state. She opened the door. Mr King was standing alone by the fire-place. He gave a cry of delight. They met halfway. Perhaps in her nervous trepidation, she would have fallen else, but, true it was, she suddenly found herself enfolded in his arms.

CHAPTER XV

As is often the case, it had come about in the most natural and unpremeditated way —the old, old way, in short ; and was not now to be gainsaid. It had been a case of love at first sight with them both ; and circumstances had conspired in a most extraordinary manner to hasten the inevitable *dénouement*. He was the strong man to help her in her need—the sturdy rock to which she could cling in this her hour of dire distress. To him she was primarily a lovely woman who, with a single bound, had found her way to his heart—a woman, therefore, to be wooed and won,

if humanly possible, and lo ! that notable achievement had, to all seeming, now accurately come to pass.

But at this instant joy was quickly merged in a feeling of wondering solicitude.

“ How pale you are ! How ill you look ! ” he said, leading her gently to an easy chair. ‘ Why ! you are trembling like a leaf. Eleanor, dear, what dreadful thing can have happened ? I was nearly startled out of my senses when I was told you were here, and had been waiting for two days to see me. I received your telegram, and called at once at 99, Curzon Street, thinking it the better plan. There I was told you were ill, and could not see me. So I left my card for you, and came away. I was obliged to go to Paris the same evening on a strange errand, which I will explain to you further on. And now, tell me, dear,

why you are here instead of in Curzon Street."

"Oh! I am so glad you have come," she replied, still panting with excitement, "so glad to have you near me once again. I feel so safe in your presence." And she took his hand tenderly in hers. "So safe now. I have dreadful things to tell you, dear, dear friend—awful things. They were merely strange and mystifying things when I sent you the telegram—but now! nobody knows what has happened but myself. Nobody else shall ever know but you, unless you will it otherwise. You ask me why I am here. Look!" And disengaging her hand from his, she tore aside the protecting lace from her neck, and revealed what caused him to utter a cry of horror.

"Good God! Eleanor, who did this thing? Was it Bruce?"

"No ; he lost his life in saving mine."

"But I do not understand. He saved your life ! From whom—from what ? "

"Ah ! yes—you may well ask from what ! I do not know—I shall never care to know. It was neither man nor beast. And but for this——" and she touched her throat with her finger, "I should think it was all a hideous nightmare."

Then Mr King recalled the words of the little undertaker's man in rusty black at "The George." He was silent for a moment ; then said he—

"And did this thing—which was neither man nor beast—did it kill Mr Bruce ? "

"I am sure of it."

"It was murder, then ? "

"What else ? "

"Great Scott ! Eleanor, you fairly take my breath away."

"Ah ! Do you wonder now that I fled

terror-stricken from Curzon Street, and am now here with you." And her hand sought his again. "But all this is still a puzzle to you, of course."

"I miss the context, most decidedly," said he, smiling rather grimly.

"Then I will tell you everything that has happened since I set foot in 99, Curzon Street. It will astonish you."

"I am quite prepared for that," said he.

"And then, perhaps, you will be able to draw certain conclusions, as I have in a sense. Still, we shall come to that shortly."

With that she related, as briefly as possible, though without missing one important point, what has been already set down in these columns.

Mr King sat as one spellbound throughout the course of her narrative. Many things suddenly became plain to him. Vague suspicions became certainties. It

was a gruesome story thus far, but he felt certain that worse was to come ; and for the sake of this dear girl by his side he wished, for one thing, that he had never met Mr Blake of Boston. However, many disturbing things might be kept from her knowledge. But this much she ought to know. Said he—

“ Do I wonder that you ran away from Curzon Street ? Rather do I wonder that you remained twenty-four hours in such a place. But, fortunately, you will have a recompense for, to my mind, one thing comes out very distinct and clear. You came to me for the solution of a certain mystery. That mystery you have now solved for yourself.”

She readily divined his meaning. But for a moment she hesitated.

“ I don’t quite follow you,” she said.

“ Think a moment,” he replied. “ Can

you not guess who it was who saved your life ? ”

“ Mr Bruce, of course.”

“ And who was Mr Bruce ? ”

Again she paused. The answer trembled on her lips one instant. Then she hazarded it—

“ My father ? ”

“ Beyond the slightest doubt. Miss Bruce had some object—a friendly object, mind you—in bringing father and daughter together. That meeting has ended in a tragedy. But none the less you are now the heiress of the wealthy Mr Bruce, and it should behove me as a struggling young barrister to—to——”

“ To what ? ” she asked, quickly bridling.

“ Well, to keep, we will say, at a certain respectful distance, and——”

“ Mr King,” said she, drawing herself up with quiet dignity. “ I should cease

to like you, if you so much as repeated that foolish remark. I believed, at least I hoped, that you had a better opinion of me."

"I am truly sorry," said he, in some confusion. "I was only jesting."

"Is this a proper time for jesting?"

"No, certainly not. It was very stupid and inconsiderate of me. Will you forgive me?"

She extended her hand frankly as a gage of reconciliation, and at that moment a servant entered, and looked significantly at the clock.

Mr King gently squeezed the little hand that lay in his, and said at once in an altered tone—

"I must not detain you any longer. I did not think it was so late. I will communicate at once with Miss Bruce, and notify her that the case has been placed

in my hands. It will be a relief to her, perhaps. Meantime, if you can make it convenient to call at my chambers to-morrow, say, at ten o'clock——”

“ Oh, certainly. At whatever time you wish,” said she.

“ Then we can go at greater length into this business.”

“ Quite so, Mr King.”

“ Good-night, Miss White.”

“ Good-night, Mr King. So kind of you to call at this late hour.”

Mr King went straightway to the District Post Office in New Oxford Street, and sent off the following telegram :—

“ Bruce, 99, Curzon Street, W.—Am sending this to relieve anxiety. Eleanor has thrown herself upon my protection. She is well, though greatly frightened and distressed. I must have serious interview

with you soon. Will Saturday suit your convenience?—KING."

This done, he strolled down in the direction of the Hotel Cecil.

There, in the smoking-room, he found Mr Blake, who sprang at once to his feet, and greeted him heartily.

"Ah! it's you, Mr King," said he; "the very man I wanted most to see."

"So Toshington told me this evening, and I called with him, about nine. You were out."

"Yes, unfortunately. Sit down. Have a cigar and a drink." And he rang the bell. "It's mighty good of you to look me up again, Mr King."

"Not at all. Tommy told me you knew about our visit to Paris, and I can quite understand your desire to see me about it."

"Why, sure. It seems Felix wasn't

burned to death in that theatre fire, after all. Do you think there can be any doubt about it ? ”

“ None whatever. Every victim was fully identified. Neither your cousin nor the lady perished in that fire, nor were they ever inside that hotel in the Rue St Hyacinthe.”

“ Then what became of them ? ”

“ Ah ! ” and Mr King smiled grimly, “ you have, indeed, given me a riddle to solve.”

Mr Blake smoked his cigar reflectively for a moment.

“ Yes,” said he, “ I guess I have. Think you can work it out ? ”

“ I don’t know. I hope so.”

“ So do I. It will save me a heap of bother. Got an idea ? ”

Mr King was silent for a time, as he lighted his cigar. From a strictly pro-

fessional point of view, he saw no present need for divulging what he had discovered in Felix Featherstone's luggage at the Langham Hotel.

"Well," said he at last, "I have a sort of theory, that is all. It may be worthless. So, perhaps, I had better say nothing for the present about it."

"All right. So long as you have really got an idea, that is good enough for me."

"Of course, should there be anything in it, I will let you know at once."

"Exactly. All I can say is that, from the present look-out, if you do succeed in fathoming the mystery, you are a mighty smart man."

Mr King laughed.

"That is as may be," said he. "Since I have undertaken the job, I will do my best, you may rely on that."

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"I am sure of it," said Mr Blake; "and we'll leave it just there for the present."

"For the present—yes."

With that their conversation drifted into other channels, and at the end of half an hour or so, Mr King arose.

"Well, I must be off now. In case of need shall you be within call at any time, Mr Blake?"

"At any time," said he, rising in turn.
"You may depend on that."

They shook hands, and then with an air of moody preoccupation, Mr King wended his way slowly homewards.

CHAPTER XVI

PUNCTUALLY at ten the following morning, Miss White put in an appearance at Mr King's chambers in Pump Court. There was a glad light in her eyes as she entered his private room, and when certain pleasant preliminaries were over, he said—

“ I have been turning this gruesome matter over and over in my mind, surveying it from every possible aspect, and the more I ponder over it, the more perplexed I become. It is a matter of common knowledge that Mr Bruce was an eccentric man, with somewhat morbid tastes. Everybody knew that, somewhere in his house in

Curzon Street, there was a rare collection of Egyptian curios. So far, there is no mystery whatever about it. But why should he resort to the trickery of revolving bookcases in order to enter this curious sanctum himself, unless concealed there was some mystery which——? ”

“ Which I discovered ? ” suggested Miss White.

“ Exactly, which you discovered in the person of this vampire creature. What was it ? Who was it ? What was it doing there ? Why did it fall upon you ? And what did Mr Bruce mean by shouting, ‘ Is not once enough, you devil ? ’ ”

Miss White shook her head.

“ I only know what I saw, what I heard, and what I endured,” said she. “ It is not for me to explain the meaning of it.”

“ Certainly not, my dear girl. But there

is at least one person in that house who knows."

"Miss Bruce?"

"Possibly she may know something. But I was not referring to her, but to the butler, Simpson. Parkyns is quite right; he holds the key to the mystery."

"You will question him, then, of course?" said she.

He hesitated a moment; then—

"Yes," said he, "if—" and he paused and shook his head slowly.

"If what?"

"If I dare."

"Are you afraid? Of what?"

"Of discoveries, perhaps." And he abruptly changed the subject. "Come," said he, "let us go to Somerset House, and make sure of one thing at least," and he reached for his hat.

They walked together, she in awed

silence, to Somerset House, and within a quarter of an hour he pointed out to her in a great tome an entry setting forth that, on the 17th of June, 1885, there was born, at 99, Curzon Street, a female child, daughter of John and Eleanor Bruce, residing at that address.

"I will get a certified copy of this. It will be your birthright," said he, "for you are that child."

"Ah!" said she, with a little complacent sigh. "It is well, perhaps, that I have ceased to be nobody in particular."

"You were everybody to me from the beginning," said he.

Her hand sought his, and a gentle pressure was her sole reply.

He was shortly in possession of the precious document, and together they returned to Pump Court.

A footman from Curzon Street sat awaiting his arrival, with a letter.

"Step into my room, Eleanor," said he. "I will join you in a moment." He held the door open for her to pass, and then opened the letter. In it was a note for ten pounds, and this is what he read :—

"DEAR MR KING,—I am very grateful for your telegram. The sudden and mysterious disappearance of Eleanor caused me very great distress. I can readily guess the cause, but grieve that she avoided seeing me before leaving, as I think I could easily have persuaded her to remain. Coming, as it did, in conjunction with a domestic bereavement, I felt it very keenly. Still I am glad that she is well, and in such good hands. It were better now, perhaps, that she remained away until after the funeral

of my brother, which is fixed for Friday, as you are apparently aware.

“ His death now releases me from certain obligations of silence respecting a matter most vital to Eleanor’s interests, and I shall be extremely obliged if you can make it convenient to call here as soon after receiving this note as possible.

“ I enclose bank-note, which pray be good enough to hand Eleanor for her present necessities.

“ I am, with renewed thanks, yours
faithfully,

DORIS BRUCE.”

“ Just sit down a moment,” said Mr King to the bearer of the letter, “ while I write a reply.” With that he entered his private room, and closed the door behind him.

“ It is a note from Miss Bruce,” said he, handing it to Eleanor. “ Read it, while I scribble off an answer.”

"Well, what do you think of it?" he said, looking up, after an interval of a minute or two.

"That she is a dear, good soul; that she knows nothing of what actually happened, and that it was very wrong of me to steal away without a word, as I did. But, then, of course, I did not know what I know now."

"There is no necessity for heart-searching, my dear girl," said he, with a smile. "You acted upon very natural impulses, and have nothing whatever to reproach yourself with."

"I shall try to think so," she replied. "She was very kind to me, and now, sending this money too, is so thoughtful of her."

"Why, it is yours," he interposed. "Everything now is yours."

"Oh! I keep forgetting. You will go and see her, of course?"

"Yes; I have written to say that I will

shortly follow her messenger to Curzon Street.”

“ And you will explain things to her, and give her my love ? ”

“ I will give her your love, but as for explaining things just yet—well, I don’t know. You must leave that to my discretion.”

“ Certainly ; that was agreed upon between us ; and you will call to see me this evening ? ”

“ As surely as the sun will set, my dearest girl.”

Mr King, upon his arrival at 99, Curzon Street, was shown at once into the reception room. There he was almost immediately joined by Miss Bruce. He noticed that she looked very haggard and ill.

“ It is very good of you to come so quickly, Mr King,” said she, motioning him to a chair.

"Not at all," said he. "Sooner or later it had to come. And I trust that upon this occasion we have done with disguises, Miss Bruce. You obtained an easy victory over me at Barnet. Perhaps if I had been more in earnest myself at that time, my convictions would not have been so easily shaken. But circumstances have undergone a startling change since then, and I now have matters of very grave import indeed, to discuss with you."

"Let it be so," said she, with quiet dignity. "Further deceptions are not only useless, but undesirable, now. I had my own reasons for assuming a disguise. They were harmless, and, in my opinion, justifiable, reasons. You came to me a perfect stranger, and under false pretences at first, to pry into secrets I had jealously guarded for years, and for her own peace of mind, from a girl who was and is very dear to me."

"You mean the lady whom I have hitherto known as Miss White, but whom I now know to be Miss Eleanor Bruce, your niece, who was born in this very house, on the 17th of June, 1885."

"Your knowledge is very accurate, Mr King. The facts are as you state them. But there were certain grave circumstances

"With which I am perfectly familiar, Miss Bruce. Circumstances much graver, perhaps, than you have ever imagined." He paused, and, as she made no answer, he went on—

"Let me recount these circumstances. I will begin with the meeting in Cairo between the mother of Eleanor and a certain American gentleman, named Felix Featherstone."

Miss Bruce's eyes were now full of undisguised astonishment. But she held her peace, and he continued—

"Some secret bond of sympathy, we will say, brought them into friendly relations, one with the other. Perhaps hers was an unhappy marriage?"

"It was," said Miss Bruce. "Let that at once be conceded."

He bowed, and continued—

"He met her afterwards in London, and the intimacy—the merely friendly intimacy between them—was renewed. He called here upon several occasions. His last visit was on Sunday, May 22nd, 1885. Is that correct?"

"Your knowledge is superior to mine, Mr King," said she. "I was not living here at the time; but I believe your statement to be substantially correct."

"Since which date," he went on, in an earnest, almost solemn tone, "no human eye has rested upon that hapless couple."

"No, no," she interposed quickly. "You

are wrong there. They eloped together that night, were traced to a certain hotel in Paris, and both perished miserably in the fire which destroyed the Opéra Comique, on the night of——”

; “The Wednesday following.”

She gave a start of surprise.

“Then you already know of this?”

“I have been so informed, but as for knowing it, that is quite another question,” he answered. “You have proofs of it, of course?”

“Oh, certainly. At least, my brother had, and he showed them to me.”

“Can you recall what they were?”

“Readily. One was a report from a private detective, who traced the runaways to Paris, and established beyond a doubt that they had perished in that terrible fire. But the most convincing evidence of all was an intercepted letter from this

Felix Featherstone, in answer to one of Mrs Bruce's, in which he warmly urged her to elope with him on that very Sunday evening. What is the natural inference ? ”

“ Inferences are often very wicked and deceitful things, Miss Bruce,” said he. “ I assume you read those precious documents yourself, Miss Bruce ? ”

“ Not once, but half a dozen times,” said she.

“ And were convinced, of course, that Nemesis had overtaken the errant couple ? ”

“ What else could I think ? What else can I now think, after a lapse of so many years ? It is, of course, a foregone conclusion. But this permit me to say, I felt very sad and grieved over the fate of the poor thing. She was a sweet, lovable creature. It was an absurd marriage, destined to failure from the very first, and I was not at all surprised to learn what had

happened. Many a tear did I shed over her untimely fate.

" My brother at once sent for me. I expected to find him in a violent state of excitement. On the contrary, he was quite calm, and briefly stated the facts, adding that he should take no action in the matter. He had made a grievous mistake, that was all, and the sooner the scandal was hushed up the better. He begged me to come and live with him, making but two stipulations: that the subject should never again be broached between us, and that the child, little Eleanor, should be for ever removed from his sight.

" I agreed to both stipulations. Eleanor was a sweet child, and her years rendered possible the course I adopted. I acted for the best. You know the result. We need not enter into that. Upon a review of all the circumstances, I cannot see that what

I have done was in any sense amiss. It was my intention from the first that she should inherit my small property. But I always thought it possible that a *rapprochement* with her father might at some time be brought about. At last, the wound seemed healed, the occasion propitious, and I brought her here, with such disastrous results, as you know. However, she must come back to her old home. I do not know whether my brother made a will or not. If so, it will probably be in my favour, for I doubt if he remembered, until within a day or two, that a daughter of his ever existed. Still, that will not matter. Everything is practically hers. At least, I will see that it is so. One thing, however, I must ask. Does she know — have you told her anything about the fate of her mother ? ”

“ Not a single word,” said he, earnestly.

"Eleanor has become very dear to me, and she has confessed to me that——"

"Yes," said Miss Bruce, with a kindly smile. "I surmised as much. It is the same old story, I suppose."

"The same old story, yes."

"Well, I have naught to say against it. I liked you from the first, Mr King."

"I cannot thank you too much for such kindly words," said he, "for they render the painful task before me very much easier. For in our common love for Eleanor, one must keep, at all costs, the hideous truth from her."

Miss Bruce started up with ashen lips.

"What—what do you mean by the hideous truth?" she exclaimed.

"I mean," said he, solemnly, "that neither Eleanor's mother nor Mr Felix Featherstone perished in the Paris fire. They never left this house on that fatal Sunday night, seventeen years ago."

CHAPTER XVII

MISS BRUCE seemed greatly perturbed by Mr King's sinister suggestion.

" You terrify me," said she. " You make my blood run cold. Surely I have had trouble enough. Is there more to come ? "

" I fear so," he replied, solemnly. " I greatly fear so. I know nothing definite, but I have a horrible presentiment of I scarcely know what. But recent circumstances compel me to carry my investigations a step further. I will be perfectly frank and open with you, and tell you all I know. Then you may judge for yourself.

But, before I come to that, let me hark back again to that memorable Sunday. Assuming, for argument's sake, that Mrs Bruce did run away, she must have taken some articles of clothing, jewellery, what not, with her. Was this the case ? "

" No," was the reply, " and that always seemed the most puzzling feature of the affair. Not a thing was missing from her room ; not so much as a hat."

" H'm," said he, " can you tell me in what room the interview between the two took place ? "

" In the library, I believe."

" Good Lord ! " he exclaimed. " The library ! "

" Yes. Why do you seem surprised at that ? "

" Oh ; only it reminded me of something Eleanor mentioned to me. I will tell you later. And now, coming back to recent

events, can you tell me the exact cause of Mr Bruce's death ? ”

She was very pale now, and ill at ease. She hesitated a moment before answering. Then said she, “ The doctor certified it to be apoplexy.”

“ Family doctor ? ”

“ Yes ; for a great many years.”

“ Just so. I begin to understand. Did he die in his own room ? ”

“ No ; and to save further questioning I will tell you all I know about it. His reason had suddenly given way. The day of his death he had become so violent that a strict watch—by the doctor's orders—was kept upon him. During the night, however, he escaped from his room, and a few hours later was found lying dead in the library.”

“ Ah ! The library again ! Who was the first to discover the body ? ”

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“ Simpson—the butler.”

“ He had been in Mr Bruce’s employ, I believe, for many years ? ”

“ For many years. Yes.”

“ And was in the house at the time of the disappearance of Mrs Bruce ? ”

“ I presume so. Yes.”

“ Excuse my asking you so many questions, Miss Bruce, but my object in doing so will become obvious to you presently. Did you see the body of your brother that morning ? ”

“ Yes. I was summoned to his room at once.”

“ And did you notice anything peculiar about his appearance ; any strange marks upon his throat, for instance ? ”

Miss Bruce gave a little inarticulate cry as of pain, and, for a moment, did not reply.

“ You know—you seem to know, every-

thing," she said at last, " so why ask me the question ? "

" Because," said he, " we are now coming to the motive which impelled Eleanor to fly from this accursed house. She had, and still has—for I have seen them—exactly similar marks upon her own neck."

Miss Bruce stared at him with open jaws, and eyes bulging with horror, her breath coming thick and fast. But no word escaped her lips.

" Eleanor owed her life, in a double sense, to her father," he continued quietly. " He lost his in saving hers. Perhaps," he added, after a solemn pause, " it was an act of God's retributive justice."

Miss Bruce swayed for an instant in her chair ; then, with an imploring gesture, she said—

" Don't drive me mad, Mr King. Have a little pity on a broken-down woman. I

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understand nothing of this, and you terrify me. You—you——”

He pushed back his chair and made a movement as if to rise.

“ Pardon me,” he said. “ Perhaps I am inconsiderate at such a time. Suppose we postpone it, until——”

“ Not for a moment,” said she, controlling her agitation with a mighty effort. “ You have gone too far. I must know the whole truth now. Further suspense would kill me outright.”

“ Very well, then,” and he related the whole story as he had received it from the lips of Eleanor. When he had ceased speaking, there was a long silence between them. At last, in a broken voice, she said :

“ I need not tell you—you can see for yourself that I knew nothing of this. My blood runs cold with the horror of the thing. I have never been inside this museum. He

never asked me to visit it. I never had the slightest curiosity to do so. I considered it a harmless hobby, which had diverted his mind from—the other matter. I never viewed it in any other light. Until now I never heard of this revolving book-case. It must have been constructed for some special purpose, as there are two other means of access to the museum—one from his bedroom, and another for visitors from a door under the staircase in the hall. As for this awful creature—this monster you have described—the idea seems incredible, fantastic, even grotesque. I cannot bring myself to believe it. Remember, I have lived in this house for many years. It has been a very quiet and monotonous existence. No incident that could have disturbed a child has ever occurred. Why should it suddenly become a house of unspeakable horrors? No, no! Mr

King. This monster is but a creation of Eleanor's excited brain."

" Well," said he, unwilling to harrow her feelings further, " let it rest, at present, at that, Miss Bruce. Of course, I am bound to get at the truth of the matter in the end, and there is one man under this roof who knows." And, glancing toward the door and lowering his voice, he added, " I mean the butler. He has been here many years, has he not ? "

" Twenty or more," she answered.

" I thought so. I will have an interview with him on Saturday ; but he must have no inkling of that intention."

" I must leave the matter entirely to your discretion," said she, quite submissively. " Yours now seems to be the master-hand."

" I am but an earnest seeker after the truth, Miss Bruce," said he, rising, " and that reminds me that I have in my pocket

here, what I consider to be an absolute indication of Mrs Bruce's innocence," and to the amazement of Miss Bruce, he placed in her hands the letter written by Eleanor's mother to Felix Featherstone bidding him to that last fatal tryst in Curzon Street ; " a weak, greatly tempted, and doubtless imprudent woman — yes ; but a guilty one—never."

Miss Bruce read the letter as one in a dream, once, twice, and again. Then, with swimming eyes, she returned it to Mr King.

" Poor creature ! " she said. " I know not by what miracle you became possessed of this letter, but there is innocence, though tempted sore, in every line of it ; and thank God for it. But it only deepens the mystery. What could have been the fate of the poor creature ? "

" That I shall shortly ascertain," said

he solemnly. "It is my duty to do so. It may possibly come to pass that a dread secret will long exist between us two alone. There may be reasons why Eleanor should never know a hideous truth. Good-bye, Miss Bruce, until Saturday." And before she could recover from her astonishment at these cryptic words, he had gone.

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Mr King walked all the way to the Middle Temple in a brown study.

"I am in a dashed awkward position," he repeated to himself again and again, with variations. "Without Blake I could have done nothing. The secret would always have remained a secret. But now that I am hot on the scent, knowing what I already know, and suspecting what I shall shortly know, how can I, for Eleanor's sake, for my sake, for everybody's sake, reveal the whole ghastly business to him ?

Frankly, it is impossible ; still, I am under obligations to the man. My honour is involved. It is the question of the loss or gain of £100,000 to him. Is there no dashed way out of the impasse ? ”

At last a forlorn-hope sort of an idea came into his brain, and he betook himself at once to the noble library of his Inn. For two hours he plodded through volume after volume of “ The State Laws ” of the American Union. At last he rose jubilant, folded up his notes, placed them in his pocket, and strode out into the sunshine, a greatly relieved man.

“ Two things are safe enough now—our secret and Blake’s money.” What the deuce were his lawyers thinking about that they never discovered this thing ? Whew ! it is a relief. I wonder if I can find him at the Cecil.”

He drove thither in a cab at once, and

caught his man as he was descending the steps into the courtyard.

"Come inside," said he. "I have news for you."

They repaired to the American bar, and over a cocktail Mr King delivered himself of the following :—

"Mr Blake," said he, "I told you last evening that I had a clue. No good," and he snapped his fingers. "It looked promising. I was over-confident—and there you are. What became of your cousin—of the blessed pair of them—the Lord only knows. I give it up. And, after all, it doesn't concern you one little bit. I have been busy with your State laws the better part of the afternoon. Mr Felix Feathers^{tone}, I understood you to say, was a citizen of the State of New York?"

"Quite right," said Mr Blake; "he was born in Lyons, Wayne County, New York."

" Precisely. Well, in that State the presumption of death, in case the party is not heard from in the interim, extends to ten years. After that time his claim to any moneys or properties devised to him by a will, wherever executed, is barred, and such moneys or properties are forfeited to the next of kin."

" Is that really so ? " asked Mr Blake, with his eye-brows lifted half-way up his forehead with astonishment. " Really so ? "

" Of course it is so. No reason whatever why you should have been put to the trouble and expense of coming over here. What sort of lawyers have you got in your country, anyhow ? " :

" Say ! look here ! Mr King, suppose we have another cocktail over this," said the delighted American, touching the bell.

" Don't mind," said Mr King, who was

equally delighted to scramble out of an awkward predicament.

"I'll cable over to-morrow and get a confirmation of this," pursued Mr Blake.

"Just what I was going to suggest ; and, by the way, here is that cheque for £500 you gave me the other day," and Mr King produced it from his waistcoat pocket.

"Well, what of it ?" asked the astonished Mr Blake.

"Unearned ; take it back," said Mr King.

"Excuse me," said Mr Blake, drawing himself up, "but I'll see you hanged, sir, before I do. What ? Unearned ? Why, what are you talking about ? If what you tell me is true—and I don't doubt it for an instant—you ought to have a cheque for ten times the amount. I shall be able to sleep in comfort — no dead body of a cousin on my chest all night long. Can

go back home, enjoy the trip, and draw my £100,000 without any further bother. Oh, sir, you have done me a tremendous service, and you have not heard the last of my gratitude. Put that cheque back in your pocket."

"All right," said Mr King. "But why not cable at once, and ascertain if I am correct or not? Within a few hours you ought to get a reply. When it comes, send a copy down to me. I must be off now. Got an appointment with a young lady."

"Oh! all right. Never keep a young lady waiting. I'll cable at once, and send you the reply straight away when it comes."

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In his subsequent interview with Eleanor, he dwelt but lightly upon the result of his visit to Curzon Street, and began to sum it up in this wise :—

"Your aunt, Miss Bruce—otherwise Miss Gibson!"—

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed Eleanor. "Then she admits it. The artful dear! And to think how well she managed it, too. I had my suspicions. Why, I said to her only the other day, 'I believe you really are Miss Gibson—but why the disguise? Why all this mystery?'"

"I suspect," said he, "indeed, I know, that there was a stupid misconception about it all. I regret to say it; but, beyond any question, your father was not quite right in his upper storey."

"And got strange ideas in his head?"

"Exactly." .

"Now, tell me," said she eagerly, "for I cannot get out of my mind what I overheard at the Carlton—did my mother ever run away with another man?"

"No, dear."

"She was a good woman?"

"A good, most lovable, but sorely tried woman."

"I am so glad, so glad to know that," said she. "Then she did not perish in a fire in Paris?"

"No. She died in Curzon Street, where you were born," said he, with the hardihood born of a rooted conviction.

"But he — my father — imagined that

"Yes. That was his special form of madness."

"I begin to understand. I may believe this implicitly, as coming from you?"

"Implicitly, as coming from me. Yes."

"And do you suggest that I should dismiss the whole affair from my mind?"

"I do most earnestly."

"Then it is done," said she, with a sigh of relief.

Mr King had his own sense of relief as he quitted Montagu Mansion shortly afterward. Arrived at his chambers in the Middle Temple, he found a note from Mr Blake awaiting him. With the note was a cablegram from Boston, and it read as follows :—

“Information quite correct. Curious oversight. Regret trouble caused you. Have communicated with San Francisco solicitors.”

A grim smile spread over his features. “Percy King,” said he, “shake hands with yourself. You have never done a better day’s work in your life than this, old boy ! ”

CHAPTER XVIII

MR BRUCE was duly buried at Highgate Cemetery on the following Saturday. The funeral was a very quiet one. His friends of late had been few. For years he had lived the life of a recluse, with the usual result. By most his continued existence, until then, had been quite forgotten.

On Saturday, as agreed upon, Mr King put in an appearance at 99, Curzon Street. During the interval since their last interview he had neither seen nor heard from Miss Bruce.

“ Well,” said she, “ Eleanor — is she better ? ”

"Much better, and more cheerful," said Mr King.

"Did you give her my love?"

"I did. And I explained to her just what I thought to be necessary. Nothing more."

"I am glad of that. My motive, at Barnet, in seeking to dissuade you from making investigations in her behalf, was a natural one. I had another plan of my own, and I thought your inquiries might be premature, and of a nature to give her a shock. I wished to avoid that, if possible. However, everything, perhaps, has happened for the best. Whatever surprise there may yet be in store for me, I can bear it, knowing that Eleanor will never know."

"I have taken ample precautions against that," said Mr King. "Eleanor will never know."

"Very well, then. Where will you see Simpson?"

"In the library."

"Still the library?"

"Still the library. I have my reasons for seeing him there."

"As you will," and she at once led the way to that apartment and rang the bell.

"Tell Simpson," she said to the footman, "that a gentleman wishes to see him here. I shall see you again, Mr King, before you go, of course?" she added.

"Certainly, by all means, Miss Bruce," said he, and the next minute he found himself alone.

Very shortly the butler, halting a moment on the threshold, and palpably ill at ease, entered the room and closed the door behind him. I think I have already described him as a tall, thin, hawk-eyed, hawk-nosed, and clean-shaven man.

He advanced a few steps, then looked inquiringly in the direction of Mr King.

"Sit down, Mr Simpson," said the latter.
"I wish to have a little talk with you."

Mr Simpson, by this time very ill at ease indeed, sat down.

"You are the butler here, I believe?"
said Mr King.

"Yes, sir."

"Been here a long time, I understand?"

"About twenty-two years, sir."

"That would be about the time of Mr Bruce's marriage?"

"Just a short while after his marriage.
Yes, sir."

"So that you were here when the child—a daughter—was born?"

"I was, sir."

"Did he seem pleased?"

"Well, fairly so, sir, I believe. It wasn't

my place to ask, or take notice of a thing like that."

"Just so—that was before he had taken you into his confidence—I quite understand."

Mr Simpson, it would have been plain to the most casual observer, quite failed to perceive the drift of Mr King's remark, though he cast an uneasy glance in that gentleman's direction.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I will make it clearer to your understanding presently, Mr Simpson," said he. "I thought you would have grasped it at once. Meanwhile, I will just drop a gentle intimation that I know a lot, Mr Simpson—almost as much as you do; so don't attempt to prevaricate or bluff me one little bit, else it may be bad for you. You take a straight tip and answer my questions truthfully. No harm will

come to you then. But I am not a man to be played with, Mr Simpson. I have come here for the truth, and the truth I mean to get out of you, if you are a sensible man. Perhaps you would prefer to be questioned by the police. If so, you are a dashed fool, and must abide by the consequences. Which is it to be ? ”

It was plain that Simpson was in a terrible funk. It had been sprung upon him so suddenly, and this Mr King was such a masterful man, and seemed, as he had said, “ to know such a lot.” All his nerves suddenly seemed to go to fiddle-strings. He put his hand to his forehead, and felt it clammy with cold sweat.

“ Well,” repeated Mr King, sternly, “ which is it to be ? ”

“ Well,” said Simpson, “ I don’t quite know yet what you mean, sir ; but I’ll answer your questions truthfully.”

"In that case you will prove yourself to be a wise man. Mr Bruce, your late master, is dead ; you have nothing to fear from him. I now represent Miss Bruce, and another ; and you will have nothing to fear from me if you tell the truth. I candidly admit that I would much prefer to keep the police out of this business. It had better be kept a family secret. You, as one deeply implicated in this affair, ought to be glad enough to consent to this."

Whatever fears Simpson may have hitherto entertained, disappeared at once.

"Willingly, sir. Willingly, sir. I have been an unhappy man for years—a slave, so to speak—bound hand and foot, and that miserable, sir, with the weight of it all on my conscience, as you would never believe."

"I can quite understand that, Mr Simpson, and sympathise with you too. But you ran an awful risk, you know."

"Don't I know it, just! But he paid me well, and frightened me nearly out of my life with threats as to what would happen if I gave the show away——"

"Oh yes. I quite understand all that. But now to business. It was on a Sunday night, in May 1887, wasn't it, that Mr Featherstone called here last?"

Simpson stared aghast at the speaker.

"My word, sir, you seem to know quite as much as I do about it."

"Not quite. You must supply the missing links. You remember the gentleman, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Perfectly."

Mr King produced a photograph from his pocket, and held it up for inspection.

"Recognise it?"

"Good Lord! yes, sir. That is the very gentleman."

"And this?" producing another portrait. Simpson looked at it, gave a great gulp, and utterly broke down.

"The sweetest lady as ever lived, she was," said he.

"Mrs Bruce?"

"Yes. She was so good and kind."

"And yet you, Simpson," said Mr King fiercely, "you lent a helping hand to this infamy."

"I—sir; oh no, sir. God forbid! I can only suspect the truth, even now. I know nothing—nothing for certain. I'd rather not know."

Mr King looked him straight in the eyes, but Simpson never faltered.

"I can meet your look, sir," said he. "I have done wrong in keeping my suspicions to myself, I dare say, but they are my

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suspicions after all. I've got 'em, and have had 'em for years, until they got into my dreams, awful—night after night—but I don't know, and, as I said before, I don't want ever to know, what really happened."

"The night Mr Featherstone called?"

"Yes, sir."

"You showed him into this room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mrs Bruce was already here, awaiting his arrival. She made no secret of it to you?"

"Oh dear, no, sir. He had called frequently. Mr Bruce seemed to know him well. Indeed, he dined here once or twice. I think I heard that they had all met in Egypt, or somewhere abroad."

"Well; you showed him into this room, and left them together?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see him leave the house?"

"No, sir."

"Did you ever see Mrs Bruce again?"

"Never."

"Was there no explanation given?"

"Yes; that they had eloped together that night."

"Did you believe it?"

Simpson hesitated, and Mr King repeated the question.

"I didn't know what to believe, sir," said he at last. "They didn't go out by the door; that I was certain of. And for the life of me——"

"That will do," said Mr King, suddenly springing to his feet. "You have only told me half the truth so far. Now for the other half. This way," and he walked to the farther end of the long room, and paused. "You keep a wild beast down here somewhere, and I want to have a look at him. How does this bookcase open, Simpson?"

CHAPTER XIX

SIMPSON seemed bewildered, and slowly shook his head.

" I don't understand you, sir ; honestly, I don't."

" Do you mean to tell me," pursued Mr King, " that you don't know how to get through these book-shelves into the museum ? "

" Indeed I don't, sir. It may be just as you say. Anything's possible in this house,; but I've never heard of such a thing, and I don't see' how it is possible either. I can take you into the museum, if you like. There are only two ways of getting in there

I know of. One door leads into it from the hall ; but that is always locked. Then there is a secret way, through a cupboard in Mr Bruce's bedroom, with winding steps. I've been down them thousands of times, so I ought to know a bit about it, sir."

Mr King was greatly puzzled. He was convinced that the man was speaking the truth, but that truth did not dovetail exactly with preconceived ideas.

" Oh, quite so," said he. " Who ought to know better than yourself ? I know that I am right all the same, but let that pass. Now, it was you, I believe, who first discovered Mr Bruce's body ? "

" Yes, sir. In this very room, lying on his back just over there by that chair," said he, pointing in the direction indicated. " You see, sir, it was just like this. He'd been raving mad all the day, and Miss Bruce had got a keeper in to look after him ;

but, bless you, in the night he fell asleep, and when he woke up he found Mr Bruce had took his hook. So in he comes to my room, which was adjoining, and pulls me about until I woke up too. Then he tells me about it. So I just slipped into my trousers, and told him not to move until I came back with the master ; for, bless you, I thought I would find him at once down in the museum. So, through the cupboard and down the steps I went to the museum, and switched on the electric light. Well, sir, I hunted in every hole and corner, but not a soul was in the place.”

“ H’m ; you are quite sure of that, Simpson ? ” said Mr King.

“ Oh ! quite, sir. ” I twig what you mean ; but I’d swear on a million Bibles that there wasn’t a living creature there then. Well, naturally, I couldn’t make it out at all, so I came upstairs again, told the man

to sit still a bit longer, and then looked through all the rooms, until, at last, I found him in here, lying just where I told you."

"Did it strike you, Simpson, that he had died a natural death?"

"Well, to speak the truth, sir, it didn't strike me that way at all."

"What was your impression, then?"

"Well, since you ask me straight, sir, it is just this. It is not for me to dispute what the doctor said; but I'd 'a bet twenty to one that he had been strangled. That's being honest, isn't it, sir?"

"I am perfectly convinced of it, Simpson; and, since you have gone so far, who do you think did it?"

"I can guess, sir."

"Good. We are getting on, Simpson; but I can go you one better, I know, so show me the way into this den of horrors. I should like especially to have a look at

this wild beast, who can strangle people with impunity here in the very heart of London."

"Very well. Follow me, sir," and Simpson led the way through the hall and up the stairs. He opened a door at the end of a long corridor, and stood aside as Mr King entered a bedroom very simply furnished.

"This is where the master slept," said he, "and this is the cupboard I mentioned. Just an ordinary sort of cupboard, you see, sir, as nobody would ever take any particular notice of. I'll go in first; you follow me. The steps wind round and round, but they are safe enough. Lord! the victuals and drink I've brought down these blessed stairs, until I got jolly sick of it; and ain't I just glad it's all done and finished."

Mr King, closely following in the spiral descent, suddenly found himself in a lofty,

well-lighted room, though of rather small dimensions, so far as floor-space went. But such a room ! a veritable lumber-room of the dead. Shelves ran round the walls, crowded with mummified cats, with ears erect and glass eyes glaring ; mummies of goats, of horned bulls, and every other animal worshipped by the Egyptians. Broken coffins stood against the walls — half-dissected human remains on trestles, a huddle of bones and skulls—and linen cere-cloths in the corners — a veritable charnel-house, pervaded by an indescribable odour of dust and decay, that was not quite offensive, yet repellent to the senses.

“ This,” said Simpson, “ was what he called his workroom, sir. A pretty sort of workroom I call it.”

“ I should say so,” was the reply. “ But where is this wild beast—this foul creature who strangled him ? ”

"Oh ! Hassan ! The Lord knows where he is ! I hain't seen him since that night. There is a broken glass in the skylight overhead, as you can see for yourself, sir, and I fancy he escaped that way. He could climb like a monkey, and I dare say——"

"But who was he ? What was he ? A man ? "

"Well, a sort of a man, sir. An Egyptian, I believe he was. The master brought him over to London years and years ago. He was an awful-looking chap ; nearly black, with ears like a horse, and such long arms and fingers as I never see on any man. I never could guess how old he was—he might have been forty, or he might have been four hundred, for all I could tell. He couldn't speak a word of English, and I think it was Arabic what they talked together. He seemed a perfect slave to the

master, used to follow him about like a dog ; and for the life of me I can't make out how he came to kill him.

" What he particularly seemed to know was all about dead things, and embalming people and things, and I really believe as some of them very cats up on the shelves there was our cats as we were always missing.

" Well, sir, here they worked together ; and in here Hassan—that was the name of him—slept." And Simpson opened a door disclosing a small room with a heap of rugs and cushions in a corner, and but little else. " And for all these years," he continued, " I have had to bring down food and drink for the black beggar, and hold my tongue about it, for not a soul in the house but me ever knew he was here."

" Rather unusual work for a butler," remarked Mr King. " Why did you do it ? "

" Well, sir, it was the money. That's what made me put up with it. The master thought I had a sort of hold on him, like ; I pretended to know more about the disappearance of Mrs Bruce and the young man than what I really did—and that has meant a small fortune to me. You asked me to speak the truth, you know."

" Quite so. Quite so ; and, since you are in the vein, tell me if you really know what became of that unfortunate couple."

" As God is my judge, sir," said Simpson earnestly, " I do not. He and me had some words one day, shortly after they'd gone, and in my temper I says, ' I know where I can put my hand on a hanging job, and not far away either,' I says. He turned as white as white at that, and says, ' What do you mean, Simpson ? ' ' I mean,' I says, ' that Mrs Bruce and that young gentleman I showed into the library that night,

never left this house, either of them, and I know it.' 'What nonsense !' said he, after he had pulled himself together a bit, like. 'What rubbish ! Still, if you talk like that outside it might do a lot of mischief, and I want to hush up the scandal—keep it quiet, like—so stay here, hold your tongue, and draw five hundred pounds a year as long as I live. Will that suit your book, Simpson ?' he says. Well, there you are, sir. I've had to put up with a lot. Waiting on a nigger ! My word ! but it means now that I've got a tidy bit put away, and car buy a nice sea-side hotel ; perhaps get married, as like as not."

"Good idea, Simpson."

"Yes ; so there you are, sir. Still," he went on. "I often wond'red what became of them two. He was as mad as a hatter —the master was ; no telling what devilry he wouldn't be up to if he was crossed in

any way—and Hassan, as I say, was his slave, and would do any mortal thing he was told to do. And, at last, that set me a-thinking. I see him always a-working here ; tinkering up dead bodies, wrapping 'em up in linen, and a-gilding and a-painting of 'em, and a-setting 'em up in fine coffins in the museum, and that did set me a-thinking. Well, upon my soul, sir, I don't know what to say about it. You are a cleverer man than I am ; you grasp my idea, I dare say—and there you are ! I've told you every blessed thing I know, at all events."

"Let us have a look at the museum," said Mr King.

Simpson opened a door.

"This is it, sir," said he, and stood aside for Mr King to enter.

By daylight it was nothing more or less than a spacious, well-lighted apartment,

containing a remarkably good and valuable collection of Egyptian antiquities; some very beautifully-painted and decorated wooden coffins stood, among others, in glass cases, which lined the walls, while the ground space was fairly covered with cases, containing objects, in many instances of great interest. In short, there was nothing here to which the most fastidious visitor could take exception.

Mr King seemed perplexed at first.

"Nothing so very horrible, after all, about this," said he.

"No, sir; not in here—at least by daylight, sir," said Simpson.

Mr King, with a keenly suspicious eye, walked twice round the room. Nothing escaped his eager scrutiny.

"Everything seems to be all right," he began—when he suddenly stopped at sight of what appeared to be some movable

steps, standing just beneath a painted panel representing a high priest making sacrificial offerings to a hideous hawk-faced god in petticoats.

"Hello!" said Mr King, "this is an interesting find." And he straightway mounted the steps, and made a careful examination of the panel. He shortly discovered that one of the bosses on the high priest's girdle was not a painted, but a "practicable" one of brass. He pressed it, when lo! the panel swung around, and there was visible the whole interior of the library.

CHAPTER XX

FOR a moment Simpson stood stock-still with wonderment.

“ You are right, sir ! Upon my word I would never have believed it ; and how you came to know—with all due respect, sir—is a bit beyond me. Ever been in the house before ? ”

“ Never.”

“ Wonderful ! And I’ve been here a matter of over twenty years, and never even dreamed of such a thing. It makes things a bit clearer, this does.”

“ To me, it makes everything clear, Simpson. Your master came down here

the other night unexpectedly, and caught this—this mal-formation up to some devilment. Words passed—the pair of them were more or less mad, I dare say—and the rest I can leave to your imagination. Hassan, as you call him, had been at this kind of work before. Nobody knew better than he how to strangle a man—or a woman.”

“ It’s enough to make your flesh creep, sir, it truly is,” said Simpson, now as white as a sheet; “ and to think of my being in it, in a manner of speaking, all these years. Lord, sir, a good breath of sea-air once more will be like heaven to me. Of course, it was done right here, somewhere.”

“ Undoubtedly—and quietly.”

“ Strangled him. I dare say dragged him up the stairs and laid him on the floor in the library ; then, knowing what he’d done, and having sense enough to think that I’d want to know a thing or two, even

if I couldn't understand his bally lingo, he gets up to the skylight somehow, breaks a glass, gets through, and makes a bunk. It's all as clear as daylight now, sir."

By this time the painted panel had swung back to its place again with a slight click, and the room was as before.

"Yes; that is all plain enough, as you say," remarked Mr King, "but the greater mystery still remains unsolved."

"It does indeed," said Simpson. "Better have another good look around, sir."

"I will," said he; and again he made a slow and deliberate examination of every possible object of suspicion in the room. The result, as before, was nil. At last, said he—

"The key to the mystery is not here. This room was open at times to public inspection, and would defy Scotland Yard itself. Let us go back to the 'workroom,'

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as you call it—and hellish work has been done there too, if I'm not greatly mistaken," and Mr King returned at once to the gruesome place and began a search, which he afterwards described in a single word—"sickening."

It is needless to dwell upon the ghastly details of that long search. He was about to give it up in despair at last, when, upon lifting a voluminous roll of papyri on an upper shelf, a modern japanned tin box was suddenly revealed. It was thickly covered with a form of dust, the nature of which he was not over eager to inquire into. Indeed, it did not matter, for the discovery of such a commonplace object, amidst such surroundings, at once stimulated curiosity. He prised it open with trembling hands, and within a very few minutes he had solved the mystery of which he had been in search.

What he had found was merely this—a few letters, written by Felix Featherstone to Mrs Bruce ; a formal report drawn up and signed by one “ Thomas Mason, private detective,” in which it was duly set forth that Eleanor Bruce and Felix Featherstone were among the victims of the Opéra Comique disaster ; and, finally, a very extraordinary document, bearing no signature, but written, as Mr King instantly divined, by Mr Bruce himself.

The letters were of a highly inflammatory nature, and duly calculated to make the least jealous of husbands “ sit up ” as the locution goes. In them Mr Bruce was alluded to in terms which, if not quite insulting, were, at least, opprobrious. They were the unconsidered letters of a hot-blooded young man careless of the consequences, and wholly blind to the fact that their discovery by the husband would

swiftly lead to the undoing of the woman, however innocent she might be.

The report of "Mr Thomas Mason, private detective," brought a grim smile out upon Mr King's hitherto solemn face —the whole thing being so manifestly "cooked" to order—that for a second he fell to wondering what the amount of this man's honorarium could have been for incurring such a deadly risk of detection.

But the strange document of which I have spoken filled him with unspeakable horror, all else being forgotten as he read the deadly and sinister thing to the end.

It was headed, "A Parable," and read thus :—

" An upright man once married a maid. She was comely, and of her honesty he had no doubt. She bore him one child, and all seemed well—in a wicked world—until a man from over the seas suddenly crossed

her path, and straightway she forgot her allegiance to the upright man, her husband. Proofs of her perfidy came to him, and they were conclusive. His duty then was clear.

“The Jews stoned to death their scarlet women. Moderns divorce or shoot them. But certain wise men preserve their bodies, by ancient methods, as reminders of the frailty of their over-rated sex. Their companions in guilt serve a no less useful purpose in this respect.

“Hence, the upright man of this parable, seeing his duty clear, hid his faithful servant Hassan—a man versed in an ancient and honoured handicraft—to lie in wait for these two destroyers of his domestic peace, these betrayers of his honour. And Hassan was swift and silent of foot, and his grip was deadly, and the tongue of the seducer and the seduced were for ever stilled.

“Then was the skill of this faithful

servant employed to goodly effect ; and now, cunningly embalmed with gum and spices of the East, enwrapped in many layers of woven flax, and glorified in red and gold coverings, suitably inscribed with hieroglyphics recounting their misdeeds—this godless twain now stand among the household belongings of the upright man.

“ And the name of the woman, as inscribed beneath, is :—

“ ‘ Buk-kuk, High Priestess of the Temple of Osiris, Thebes. Temp. Rameses II.’

“ And the name of the man :—

“ ‘ Heru A., gatekeeper of that same temple.’

“ And thus has justice been fulfilled.”

“ Well, sir. Found anything ?”

The voice was Simpson’s.

Quickly repressing a shudder of horror, Mr King thrust the papers into his breast

pocket, and assumed an air of disappointment.

"Nothing to speak of, Simpson. It may lead to something. That remains to be seen. I am tired now. I shall not require you any longer, Simpson. Go and tell Miss Bruce that I wish to speak to her in the library at once."

"Yes, sir," and greatly wondering, the butler disappeared up the winding staircase.

Mr King then re-entered the museum, and carefully scrutinised the inscriptions beneath the upright mummy cases ranged against the walls. Suddenly he gave a gasp, and his eyes dilated with horror. Glorified in red and gold indeed, were the coffins of Buk-kuk, the High Priestess, and Heru A., the gatekeeper of the Temple—otherwise, the hapless victims of a madman's mistaken vengeance.

He crossed with a heavy heart to the

steps, pressed the brazen boss of the panel, and, as the latter swung open, he suddenly found himself face to face with Miss Bruce. She was deathly white, and trembling in every limb.

"Have you found anything? Do you know?" And as he did not at once answer, she added, "I see. Then tell me. I am prepared for the very worst."

He gave her his hand, and assisted her down the steps. Then he led her to the two coffins, and pointed to them in silence.

A great gulp came into her throat, and for a moment she could not speak. At last—

"Are you sure?" she said.

By way of answer he took the "Parable" from his pocket, and placed it in her hands. She recognised the writing in an instant.

"It is his," she said; and read to the end. Then she looked up.

"He was mad, mad, mad!" she ex-

claimed. "Oh, the horror of it! The tragedy of it! The sad, sad ending! The folly of it all! What is to be done, Mr King? Does Simpson know?"

"He knows nothing definite. He must never know. Nobody must ever know but our two selves."

"But what is to be done? They cannot remain here. It would be a sacrilege. What is to be done?"

"God knows," said he. "I must think it over. Come; let us get out of this. My nerves have gone to pieces; I can't stand it any longer."

They passed up the steps together, and into the library. The "nysterious book-case clicked behind them. A few moments later Mr King was out in the open again, struggling with a very thorny problem.

.

A week or so later, as Mr Blake was on

his way across the Atlantic to claim the inheritance of his dead kinsman, the problem was quietly solved. Among the landed possessions of Mr Bruce was an unoccupied old manor house, begirt by a pine forest, in the heart of North Devon—a secluded and desolate spot. Thither the bodies of the hapless pair were secretly taken, and as secretly interred beneath the pines. How this was managed by Mr King it is not our purpose, nor would it serve any useful end, to disclose.

.
By the time these words appear in print, "Miss White" will have become Mrs Percy King, and No. 9, Curzon Street, with all its contents, will have passed into the hands of uninquiring strangers.

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